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26 February 2019**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 26 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

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Transatlantic Alliance

1. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What recent progress he has made on strengthening the transatlantic alliance. [909437]

18. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What recent progress he has made on strengthening the transatlantic alliance. [909454]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The UK works closely with Europe and the US to promote a strong transatlantic partnership. It is vital for our security and prosperity that we work with the Trump Administration to promote transatlantic unity through NATO. Since July's NATO summit, we have urged allies to increase defence spending and have encouraged the US to recognise the significant allied progress.

Mrs Murray: May I welcome the efforts my right hon. Friend has made in his role to strengthen those ties and ask in particular what assessment he has made of the security and intelligence co-operation between our two countries on which so much of our peace and security depends?

Sir Alan Duncan: The intelligence co-operation between our two countries is enormously valuable. It proceeds regularly on a basis of complete trust and adds importantly to the security of the wider world.

Mary Robinson: Later this year, the UK will host a NATO summit that will mark the 70th anniversary of the organisation's founding. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as America's closest ally in Europe, we need to be willing to make the argument to our European partners that the financial burden of defending our continent needs to be shared fairly and that other countries need to follow the UK's example by meeting the NATO defence spending pledge?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—indeed, that is exactly what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been doing over the past week in his travels around the capitals of Europe—and I fully agree with her, as do Her Majesty's Government, that

burden sharing is important. We have been making that point with European partners—NATO partners in Europe—and I am pleased to say that there is progress, but there is still more to be done.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): A strengthened transatlantic alliance could lead to more action in Sri Lanka to tackle human rights abuses. Will the Minister of State urge the Trump Administration to join him and the Foreign Secretary in putting pressure on the Sri Lankan Government to tackle human rights abuses and to respect international calls for a war crimes inquiry?

Sir Alan Duncan: As the hon. Gentleman appreciates, I do not personally cover Sri Lanka. However, I am confident that, across the world, we work very closely together on all issues of human rights, and we will continue to do so in countries as appropriate.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that, after two world wars, we set up the United Nations, we set up NATO and we set up the European Community in an early form to stop our ever having wars again. Is he not concerned about some of the words and some of the actions coming out of the White House under President Trump at the moment?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a strong pillar of our foreign policy that we believe in multilateral organisations and participate in them fully. Obviously, we will soon be leaving one of them, but that will not diminish our co-operation with the EU27 thereafter.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the impact on the transatlantic alliance of the recent talks in Vietnam between North Korea and America? Does this have the potential to strengthen our security in the west?

Sir Alan Duncan: My understanding is that those talks are happening today, so it is not easy for me to comment on something that has not quite yet taken place. However, my skills of foresight are well recognised in this House, as I well appreciate. I hope that these conversations and discussions will lead to a more peaceful world and are as successful as we would wish.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Yesterday, the International Court of Justice found that the UK's control of the Chagos islands is illegal and wrong. This damning verdict deals a huge blow to the UK's global reputation. Will the Government therefore heed the call of the ICJ to hand back the islands to Mauritius, or will they continue to pander to the United States military?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady is labouring under a serious misapprehension: yesterday's hearing provided an advisory opinion, not a judgment. We will of course consider the detail of the opinion carefully, but this is a bilateral dispute, and for the General Assembly to seek an advisory opinion by the ICJ was therefore a misuse of powers that sets a dangerous precedent for other bilateral disputes. The defence facilities in the British Indian Ocean Territory help to keep people in Britain

and around the world safe, and we will continue to seek a bilateral solution to what is a bilateral dispute with Mauritius.

UK Soft Power

2. **Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas. [909438]

16. **James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas. [909452]

23. **Sir Nicholas Soames** (Mid Sussex) (Con): What steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas. [909459]

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): We should be proud of the UK's soft power and the contribution that independent institutions such as the BBC and the British Council make to it. That is why the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has trebled its investment in Chevening scholarships since 2015, helped to fund the biggest expansion of the BBC World Service in 70 years and provided additional funding for the British Council's work in developed countries. It is also why my Department is developing a cross-Government soft power strategy to further project our values and advance our interests overseas.

Peter Heaton-Jones: The Minister rightly mentioned the BBC World Service. Will he join me in celebrating the excellent work that that organisation does, given how important it is for expressing the UK's soft power overseas, and in calling on the BBC to expand and enhance its reach?

Mark Field: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in recognising the excellent work of the BBC World Service, which brings the UK and its values to the world at large. Since 2016, Her Majesty's Government have been funding the World 2020 programme, which has seen the World Service undergo its biggest single expansion in the past 70 years, with 12 new language services opened in 2017-18, and I have been very proud to watch some of that excellent work in India.

James Morris: The plays of Shakespeare have been translated into many languages and performed in many countries around the world, including China, so does the Minister agree that Britain has amazing cultural and linguistic assets that we can use to project our soft power around the world and to support democratic values, freedom of speech and creativity, as we build a new relationship with the world?

Mark Field: I do indeed agree with my hon. Friend. For example, in 2016, the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death was marked by an HMG-funded cultural programme called Shakespeare Lives, which was jointly delivered by the British Council, the GREAT campaign and the FCO, involving the BBC and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I congratulate my hon. Friend and his colleagues on their excellent work to co-ordinate better our soft power effort, but does he agree that it is

very important that there is a proper plan to follow up on some of the very successful royal visits overseas with a very well co-ordinated effort, particularly in soft power?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend. We have already had questions today on Shakespeare and the BBC, but he is absolutely right that our royal family is one of our greatest soft power assets, and we will do our level best, through the GREAT campaign and elsewhere, to ensure that strength continues.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): An important part of our soft power is our commitment to tackling global poverty and to international development. Will the Minister therefore take this opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to 0.7% spending on overseas aid and to the Department for International Development as a stand-alone Department, independent of the Foreign Office?

Mark Field: I am hearing a lot of chuntering from my left, as I have two DFID Ministers beside me—

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): And a former one.

Mark Field: And a former DFID Minister, too.

I agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), and this is a matter not just of soft power, but of hard power. There is little doubt that the 0.7% commitment has an important part to play. I see it in all parts of Asia, not least in Pakistan and Bangladesh, which have the two single biggest DFID budgets. It is important for aid and development and, indeed, for the prosperity fund, which will allow British companies to prosper in the years to come.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Over the past three years, this Government's chaotic approach to Brexit has shredded our international credibility and diminished our soft power. Whether Brexit goes ahead or not, there is an important job to be done to repair our international standing in the world and build alliances, so will the Minister have a word with the Defence Secretary and ask him to cut out the foolish rhetoric, which has real consequences?

Mark Field: I obviously represent Asia and the Pacific abroad, and whenever I go to that part of the world, I always come back much more uplifted about the UK's brand. We find that many countries in that part of the world—indeed, this applies globally—have had strong dealings with the UK for decades, if not centuries, and they recognise that we will have strong connections in the years to come. They know that there is obviously a small amount of uncertainty with the Brexit arrangements that are taking place now, but the positivity of the UK's brand, our reliability as a partner and the sense that we project international values are important.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The Minister is right to point out outside organisations. Will he, like me, pay due credit to the brave non-governmental organisations that do fantastic work and enhance our soft power in some of the most difficult conflict environments in the world, not least Yemen? Today, the United Nations is appealing for £3.2 billion to help

organisations such as Saferworld and International Rescue Committee. Should that not be our focus, rather than the £4.6 billion we spent on arms?

Mark Field: We have announced only today, in the aftermath of the Sharm el-Sheikh negotiations, that we will be putting a further £200 million into Yemen. It is important to recognise the tremendous contribution made by so many British citizens and British NGOs across the globe. That is one aspect of soft power that will enhance our standing in the years to come. It is in this sort of area where I hope we will continue.¹

Stephen Gethins: I welcome the Minister's commitment, but that is outstripped by our arms sales. The UK could be a serious player for peace in the region. Will we move away from arming combatants and move towards finances that will help to prevent poverty and migration, because that prevents conflict—not arms sales?

Mark Field: We have made agreements—not least the negotiations that have taken place in recent months in Stockholm—to try to work together to ensure that the worst offenders do not have arms sales. It is not the case that we do not have an eye on the ethics and the moral values that are close to the heart of many of our constituents across the country. We will continue to work closely and utilise as much soft power as we can in the years to come.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May I urge the Government to use their soft power and diplomatic network to enthusiastically support the efforts of Cypriots to deliver a negotiated settlement for a free and united Cyprus?

Mark Field: I am happy to answer that in short order: yes. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas has worked tirelessly in that regard and we will continue to do so. I think that those in the diaspora in the UK, both Turkish and Greek Cypriots, recognise that it is important that we put 45 years of great difficulty behind us. I think that the UK has had an important part to play in helping to bring those sides together.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): We are discussing soft power. I want to ask the Minister about an issue where the exercising of that power is growing long overdue. When we gather for the next Foreign Office questions on 2 April, it will be six months to the day since Jamal Khashoggi was murdered in Istanbul. Will the Minister ask his boss, the Foreign Secretary, to guarantee to the House that before we reach that sad milestone, he will present the Government's findings on who, ultimately, is responsible for that murder and what actions the Government are taking in response?

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will be going to Saudi Arabia this week, and I hope that there will be progress in relation to the very serious issues the right hon. Lady raises. She will be aware that we will be hosting a conference in this country in July—again, a very important part of British global soft power—that will look at the dangers journalists face across the world. I think that the fact we are doing that will reflect well, and I hope that she and the

Labour party will want to play an important part in that role. We need freedom for journalists to be able to go about their everyday business. The situation with Khashoggi is the worst and most glaring example, but some 80 journalists were murdered going about their business last year and many hundreds have been locked up. Internationally, we need to come together to stand up for those values.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Minister for that answer. While a conference is important, it is hardly an answer to the question of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. There are no official answers and there are no official actions. Worse than that, the Foreign Secretary went to Berlin last week and told one of the few Governments willing to act on the Khashoggi murder, by banning arms sales to Yemen, that they are wrong to do so. May I ask the Minister to once more ask his boss the Foreign Secretary—it is a simple request—whether he will, by the time of the next Foreign Office questions, six months on from the Khashoggi murder, be telling us all the people he believes are responsible and what action they are going to take in response?

Mark Field: As I said, my right hon. Friend will be in Saudi Arabia and clearly, this issue will be discussed. I hope that he will be in a position to update the House on 2 April or, indeed, prior to that time. The right hon. Lady raised the issue of the arms trade. We are proud to build on the contribution made by Robin Cook when he was Foreign Secretary that means that arms sales regulations here in the UK are among the strictest across the western world, and they will continue in that vein.

Iran's Ballistic Missile Programme

3. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of Iran's ballistic missile programme. [909439]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Iran's ballistic missile programme presents a threat to the security of the middle east and Europe that cannot be ignored. The Foreign Secretary raised the issue of ballistic missiles with Foreign Minister Zarif in Tehran on 19 November, and on 5 December, the Foreign Secretary issued a statement following Iranian testing of a medium-range ballistic missile. Alongside our partners, we continue to call on Iran to act consistently with all UN Security Council resolutions in relation to its ballistic missile programme.

Rachel Maclean: Earlier this month, crowds on the street chanted, "Death to Theresa May," and called for the destruction of Israel and America. Will the Minister condemn that rhetoric, and does he share my concern that President Rouhani has also stated that he is going to continue his programme of uranium enrichment?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right: of course, the rhetoric that flows so often from staged public demonstrations in Tehran does not help very much, but it has to be seen in the context of Iranian politics. On uranium production, the International Atomic Energy Agency recently confirmed for the 15th time that Iran was not in breach of the provisions of the joint comprehensive plan of action. We still believe that that

is a fundamental bank of relationships with Iran to try to curtail its activities, and of course we would strongly condemn any move away from those JCPOA principles by Iran.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Is the Minister concerned, as I am, that Iran is using Yemen as a testing ground for its missile programme? We have seen the UN panel of experts talk about the new kamikaze drones that are coming out of Iran. We have had the Badr-1—the missile system that looks like the V2—being launched into Saudi Arabia, and we are seeing from technical reports that the enhancements being applied by Iran in that war are considerable. This is very worrying.

Alistair Burt: The UN has already declared that missiles of Iranian origin have been fired from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen towards Saudi Arabia, sometimes with lethal effect. Of course, it is essential to get the conflict in Yemen to an end to prevent that sort of threat, to prevent it being used as a base for the testing of weapons and to bring some comfort and humanitarian relief to people in Yemen.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Is it not the case that neither the carrot of the nuclear deal nor the stick of sanctions and other policy measures has so far encouraged Iran to be a responsible member of the international community? What more does the Minister think can be done to persuade Iran to desist from supporting terror, insurgency and pursuing its ballistics programme?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend is right, and of course the short answer is that we keep on going, because the consequences of a confrontation leading to a conflict in the middle east involving Iran and others would be catastrophic. We will continue with our efforts. We have sanctions against elements in Iran. There are the economic sanctions employed by the United States and others, but we have to keep looking for a way in which we end the risk of a serious confrontation in the middle east. It is not to be encouraged by harsh rhetoric on either side, and I think that the United Kingdom's diplomatic efforts to try to bring some resolution in the area are the best thing that we can do.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Given the extent of the human rights abuses of the Iranian regime, the detention of British citizens and so on, and the continued state sponsorship of terrorism and terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, how does the Minister assess the success of the nuclear deal and efforts to bring Iran into a proper state of affairs as far as international relations are concerned?

Alistair Burt: The right hon. Gentleman puts together two things, quite rightly. First, the success of the nuclear deal can be measured in the fact that, as I said, the IAEA confirms that there has been no progress by Iran in relation to its nuclear ambitions. That is important in its own context, but secondly, did it lead to any change in behaviour in the region? The short answer is that no, it did not, so we need to continue to demonstrate that we are as concerned about the other aspects of Iran's behaviour as we are about nuclear issues and get to see some change in that behaviour if we are to avoid the confrontation that I mentioned earlier.

Persecution of Christians

4. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle the persecution of Christians overseas. [909440]

7. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his counterpart in China on the persecution of Christians in that country. [909443]

22. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle the persecution of Christians overseas. [909458]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The UK has long championed freedom of religion, but I am concerned that we could do more for the 240 million Christians estimated to be facing persecution for their faith around the world. I have therefore asked the Bishop of Truro to conduct an independent review into what more the FCO can do. Last week, I agreed the terms of reference for his review.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Foreign Secretary for that review. When I meet Christians from countries where they are under pressure or persecuted, I see loyal citizens who contribute enormously to those countries, whether in health, education, business or so much else. Why do those countries persecute their citizens for their faith?

Mr Hunt: It is often because they are in the grip of totally misguided ideologies. I thank my hon. Friend for his long championing of this issue. It is a little known fact that around 80% of the people who suffer persecution for their faith are Christians, often in some of the poorest countries in the world—and particularly in the middle east, which 100 years ago had a population that was about 20% Christian. Now that is down to 5%.

Maria Caulfield: Given that a third of Christians in China and Asia are experiencing high-level persecution—that is 140 million people—what discussions have the Government had with the Chinese to end that? What protection can the Government give those Christians facing persecution?

Mr Hunt: We do all we can to raise these issues. I raised freedom of religion issues with my counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, when I went to China last August. We raised them in November in the Universal Periodic Review—a regular review of human rights issues in China. The noble Lord Ahmad is in Geneva this week for the UN Human Rights Council, where he will also be raising the issue of freedom of religion in China. My hon. Friend is right to be concerned.

Mike Wood: It was reassuring to see the Pakistan Government protecting the independence of their courts in overturning the blasphemy conviction against Asia Bibi. What support are this Government giving the new Government in Pakistan to ensure consistent protection of Christians from persecution?

Mr Hunt: We have excellent relations with the new Government of Pakistan; in fact, I spoke to the Pakistani Foreign Minister yesterday. We co-operated on the Asia Bibi issue. We wanted to support them because we

recognise that the situation on the ground there is extremely fragile. They are trying to do the right thing. As one of the biggest aid donors to Pakistan, we play a crucial role in stiffening their resolve to do the right thing.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): As the Foreign Secretary will know, the Chinese face mounting criticism over the treatment of Uighur Muslims, up to 1 million of whom are said to be in detention. What action are we taking in Geneva to try to establish oversight of the situation of the Uighur Muslims?

Mr Hunt: On 4 July last year, Lord Ahmad, who is in Geneva at the moment, was appointed the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religious belief. He is himself from a persecuted Muslim minority, so he understands these issues. The answer is that China is, of course, a sovereign country but we raise this issue at every opportunity. We are very concerned about it. If we do not raise these issues, we have to ask who will. That is why we have a big obligation.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The continuing bloodshed in the Sudan is threatening Christians and Muslims alike. What plans do the Government have to deal with the Bashir regime, to make sure that we bring some peace to that bedevilled country?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met the Foreign Minister of Sudan yesterday. We remain concerned; Sudan is one of the five countries where Christians suffer the worst persecution, alongside North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan and one other country. We are very concerned and continue to raise the issue at every opportunity.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I thank the Foreign Secretary for his hard work and dedication to the job in hand. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on international freedom of religion or belief and on Pakistani minorities. Christians are being persecuted across the world. What steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to collect data about persecuted Christians and belief groups in order to support policy making?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue. Good data is available from the campaigning organisation Open Doors, from which we get the figure that there are 240 million persecuted Christians around the world. One of the recommendations that I am sure the Bishop of Truro will be considering is whether we need to be more robust in our data collection, so that we can better inform debates in this House.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: One sentence! Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat: Thank you, Mr Speaker. [*Laughter.*] The Bishop of Truro's review of the Foreign Office's work is very welcome. Will the Foreign Secretary include Ministers in other Departments to ensure that the Bishop's work in relation to the persecution of Christians, and the British Government's handling of that support, are cross-governmental?

Mr Hunt: I shall try to give a one-sentence answer. The Bishop is free to make whatever recommendations he likes, and we have facilitated introductions to other Departments so that he can liaise with them during his review.

Zimbabwe

5. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the prospects for peace and stability in Zimbabwe. [909441]

25. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What recent assessment the Government have made of the prospects for peace and stability in Zimbabwe. [909461]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): Fundamental political and economic reform in line with Zimbabwe's own constitution is vital for a peaceful and stable Zimbabwe. I spoke to Foreign Minister Moyo on 29 January, and made clear that the Zimbabwean Government must investigate all alleged human rights violations and deliver on President Mnangagwa's public commitment to reform.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Minister agree that, first, the elections in Zimbabwe were seriously flawed, and secondly, the recent repression of peaceful protests was completely unacceptable and outrageous? Can she confirm that there is currently no question of Her Majesty's Government's supporting Zimbabwe's return to the Commonwealth, and does she agree that we should now consider extending targeted sanctions?

Mr Speaker: According to my assessment, two agreements and one confirmation are required.

Harriett Baldwin: I agree, Mr Speaker. There were at least three questions in there, and I will try to answer all of them.

External and international observers were invited to see the recent elections, and judged that, while imperfect, they were freer and fairer than those that took place in 2013 and 2008. As for sanctions, my hon. Friend will be aware that, along with the EU, we renewed them recently, targeting specific individuals and focusing on one organisation.

Zimbabwe has applied to join the Commonwealth. I must say that given the recent behaviour of the security forces, it would be difficult for the UK to support the application were it to come before the Commonwealth Secretariat in the near future, but that is a hypothetical situation.

Peter Aldous: In view of the continuing police and army brutality, will the UK Government immediately withdraw any support for the review of Zimbabwe's relationship with the international community, step up efforts—working with neighbouring states—to hold President Mnangagwa to account, and ensure that the Home Office does not deport any asylum seekers to Zimbabwe while the current human rights violations continue?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend asked about the ongoing engagement with neighbouring countries. I discussed the situation in Zimbabwe recently with the

South African Government, the Government of Mozambique and the new high commissioner from Botswana. I think it important for those in the region to send similar messages about addressing the recent well documented and credible reports. My hon. Friend may want to raise the Home Office issues with Home Office colleagues, but my understanding is that around the world the UK would return people to their country of origin only when we and the courts considered it safe to do so.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On 12 February, my constituent Victor Mujakachi was detained. The intention was to deport him to Zimbabwe, which has seen tragic human rights abuses in the past few months. What assessment did the Government undertake of the human rights situation in that country before they sought to deport Victor and others?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady will, of course, want to raise that case with Home Office colleagues, but my understanding is that each case is taken on its merits, and that neither the UK Government nor our courts would deport someone unless it was widely agreed by the courts that it was safe to do so.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister not agree that much more direct liaison is needed between the nation states in the south of Africa to ensure that greater pressure is applied for efforts to impose additional sanctions that will produce the desired result in Zimbabwe?

Harriett Baldwin: I do not think we can particularly count on the southern area nations for support for sanctions; in fact their public statements have been critical of the sanctions that the EU has put in place. However, the UK believes there is a role for very specifically targeted sanctions on individuals and Zimbabwe defence industries, and we believe that those sanctions do not have a wider economic impact that harms the people of Zimbabwe.

Mr Speaker: Distinction to be equalled only by brevity: I call Mr Andrew Mitchell.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Since 14 January there has been wholesale persecution by the military of the civilian population: documented cases of rape of civilians by the military, use of live rounds, and 17 civilians shot dead. Will the Minister make clear through our excellent new British high commissioner in Harare the terrible price Zimbabweans are paying for the economic mismanagement of their country and the subversion of the rule of law?

Mr Speaker: I think distinction is still a long way ahead.

Harriett Baldwin: I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to our ambassador and indeed the whole team in our embassy in Harare, who are working heroically on what have been some sickening reports from credible sources. He will know that we provide a wide variety of support to civil society in Zimbabwe, and I had a meeting with civil society leaders when I was in South

Africa recently. My right hon. Friend will be aware that for their own security we cannot disclose which organisations we support, but we endorse the credible reports he alludes to.

Israel and Palestine

6. Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken towards helping to secure a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine. [909442]

11. Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): What recent diplomatic steps he has taken towards helping to secure a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine. [909447]

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): Yesterday I met the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Riyad al-Maliki—I met the Sudanese Foreign Minister on the same occasion—and I had a meeting with the Israeli Foreign Ministry last week in London and Israeli Ambassador Regev. We keep in constant contact with all parties who might have an influence on the middle east peace process to demonstrate how fundamental it is to United Kingdom foreign policy that this long-standing matter is finally settled.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I have here the names of four young Palestinians, all under the age of 18, who are currently in prison: Yacob Qawasmeh, Akram Mustafa and Ahmad Silwadi, and one who is 15 years old, Akram Daa'dou, who in the early hours of the morning in the presence of—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Mr Russell-Moyle. There is a lot of pressure on time. We have not got time for lists; what I want is a question with a question mark, and then we will have a ministerial answer.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: In the early hours of this morning, in the presence of his family, Akram Daa'dou was dragged from his home by Israeli occupation forces. His family have no idea where he is. Will the Minister raise with his Israeli counterpart questions about where this gentleman and the other young people are, and ensure that their rights under the fourth Geneva convention are upheld, as they should be in the Palestinian occupied territories?

Alistair Burt: Through the consulate-general in Jerusalem we regularly express concerns to Israel about activity relating to minors on the west bank. We have offered help and support for dealing with children who may have been detained and we are constantly in contact about any risk of incursion there and the effect on civil rights.

Karen Lee: Labour is committed to a peaceful two-state solution that guarantees a secure Israel alongside a viable state of Palestine. For anyone working towards that goal it is worrying that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has struck an election deal with two extreme nationalist parties whose leading members have advocated the forced expulsion of millions of Palestinians. Will the Minister commit to using all available diplomatic measures to ensure that that coalition does not threaten a peaceful two-state settlement?

Alistair Burt: Coalitions in Israel and matters affecting the Israeli elections are not a matter for the UK Government. Our position on a two-state solution and a comprehensive solution to the middle east peace process is exactly the same as that of colleagues on the other side of the House and, as I said earlier, it is a fundamental part of UK foreign policy that we will continue to press for that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): One of the big problems the Palestinians have is that they do not speak with one voice. Is there any sign of a reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is correct: the issues between those in authority on the west bank and those in Gaza—between Fatah and Hamas—have long been a difficulty in getting a consistent Palestinian voice. My understanding is that conversations about reconciliation are continuing, and they are being handled very much by the Government of Egypt. If there is to be the peaceful settlement of issues in the middle east peace process that we want, it is essential that there is a consistent voice from Palestinians based around the Quartet principles and that the efforts made towards security and peace by the Palestinian Authority over a lengthy period are followed by others.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I welcome the decision of the British Government to proscribe Hezbollah. Would my right hon. Friend care to consider the distinction between Iran, which is using its rocket technology to produce ballistic missiles, and Israel, which will shortly be landing a scientific explorer on the moon?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is right to make reference to the fact that the United Kingdom has found it impossible to continue any longer with the distinction between the military and political wings of Hezbollah, hence my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary's decision yesterday in relation to proscription. Israel's scientific technology and its progress in recent decades has been quite remarkable, and the use of technology for peace is something that we would all wish to see, but it is a complex region and a difficult neighbourhood. We support continuing efforts for peace in the region.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Too often, resolution of this conflict feels like a lost cause, but the British Government could prevent that from being the case by recognising the state of Palestine formally. Why will they not do that?

Alistair Burt: As I think the House knows, I have been anxious for many years to ensure that this is not a lost cause and that we have to keep at it. It remains fundamental in the region, and we will keep at it. The recognition of a state of Palestine would not, per se, end the issue, but we are pledged to do that when it is in the best interests of peace and of the peace process in the region.

Leaving the EU: Diplomatic Network

8. **Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con):** What plans he has to expand the UK's diplomatic network after the UK leaves the EU. [909444]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): On 31 October, I announced the largest expansion of our diplomatic network for a generation. It involves opening 14 new diplomatic posts and 335 additional personnel overseas, and it will raise the number of sovereign missions to 161, second only to the USA and China.

Stephen Metcalfe: I have seen at first hand the value of our missions around the world to raising our global aspirations, so I particularly welcome the announcement of the new posts and missions in Africa. What thought has been given to ensuring that those roles work across trade, diplomacy and development?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to ask that question, particularly about Africa, where the high commissioner or ambassador is the most senior person on the ground and has people from all Government Departments in the UK reporting to him. Making sure that we have a one-Government approach to our diplomacy will be a central part of our new fusion doctrine.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary intend to continue sanctions against those persons, groups and entities currently subject to EU sanctions?

Mr Hunt: Broadly speaking, yes.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this newly strengthened diplomatic network should work in tandem with our soft power influences, such as using 40 Commando, based in Taunton Deane, to be rushed out in times of natural disasters or hurricanes, as happened in the Caribbean? Working together, we can really demonstrate the qualities of this great nation.

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend, the consul for Taunton Deane. On the expansion of the diplomatic network, among the 14 new overseas posts will be three new resident commissioners, in Antigua and Barbuda, in Grenada and in St Vincent the Grenadines, which I hope might be of interest to colleagues thinking about their careers.

Mr Speaker: When the hon. Lady is not in Taunton Deane, she could trog around some of those territories if she were so inclined.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, I welcome the expanded network. Following our recent constructive meeting with the Immigration Minister, may I urge the Secretary of State to meet her to see how the network can be used to support cultural and business exchanges between African countries and the UK, and particularly to provide the local knowledge that is essential for visa applications, which remain a matter of huge concern?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that if we are going to get this right we have to combine all that we do, particularly in terms of our soft power. The British Council has an immensely important role in Africa. In particular, we need to be better at joining up

the work between the Department for International Development and the Foreign Office, and that is why we are proud to have joint Ministers on the Front Bench to ensure that that happens.

Equal Rights Coalition

9. **Nick Herbert** (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): What plans he has for the UK in its role as co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition in 2019-20. [909445]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The UK looks forward to co-chairing the Equal Rights Coalition with Argentina from May this year. We will use our role to promote and protect LGBT rights globally.

Nick Herbert: I thank the Minister for that answer. It is good news that the UK is taking over this role, but the Equal Rights Coalition is in its infancy and needs more work to ensure that the global fight for LGBT rights is effective. Will the Minister assure me that she will commit sufficient resources to the UK's chairmanship of the Equal Rights Coalition and ensure effective co-ordination between Departments in this important year?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend's leadership and to his all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights for drawing cross-Government work together. I can assure him, on behalf of both the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development, that we will certainly give the organisation the resourcing it needs. He will be aware that its work fits in with the Equalities Office's overall strategy, including the international element.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): We have seen a repressive crackdown on the LGBT community in Egypt, with routine detentions even for waving rainbow flags on social media. What can the Minister do to raise such concerns? Does she still believe, as the previous Foreign Secretary claimed, that—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Blurt it out, man; don't be distracted.

Gerald Jones: Does she still believe, as the previous Foreign Secretary claimed, that the UK should act as a champion for the Sisi regime that is carrying out the repression?

Harriett Baldwin: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East and our ambassador to Egypt regularly raise the examples that the hon. Gentleman cites as part of the ongoing engagement with the Egyptian Government.

Human Rights

10. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he is taking to promote human rights globally. [909446]

17. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What diplomatic steps his Department is taking to promote and support human rights internationally. [909453]

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

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) will be pleased to know that the UK is wholeheartedly committed to the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide. As a result, we continue to support the work of the UN Human Rights Council and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The UK is one of the longest-standing members of the UNHRC, and we are keen to maintain that record at next year's elections.

Catherine West: Child soldiers represent a major human rights concern. What more can be done to condemn and improve the situation of child soldiers in Yemen, both those on the Houthi side and, crucially, the Sudanese children being exploited by the Saudi forces?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady is right to point out that the situation is absolutely heartbreaking. I am the father of an 11-year-old son, and boys of roughly that age are fighting in parts of the world such as Yemen. I reassure her that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will raise the matter when he is in Saudi Arabia in the days ahead.

Kerry McCarthy: Human rights defenders around the world are under attack. They are censored, imprisoned and sometimes even murdered for speaking out, and women who speak out in countries such as Saudi Arabia are particularly vulnerable. Does the Minister agree that we need to do more to support the women around the world who are brave enough to stand up for what they believe in?

Mark Field: The hon. Lady is right that that is a major issue. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East raised the matter when he was in the region last week and will continue to do so.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): When I was chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, we tried on a couple of occasions to raise human rights violations against LGBT citizens around the world, but our attempts were regularly blocked by Uganda, China, Russia and several other countries. Will the Minister use his influence, particularly in the Commonwealth, to try to raise such issues so that we can give hope to millions of people living in those countries?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is right that the issue is still contested. We will continue to make the case for LGBT rights, and all Foreign Office Ministers and other Ministers with broader foreign affairs responsibilities will make it clear when abroad that we need to stand up for these important rights.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On 5 April, Professor Zaffaroni, a justice of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, will present to His Holiness the Pope a report on the consequences of the criminalisation of same-sex relations in the Caribbean. The Government will be invited to be represented at the presentation, so will the Minister ensure that they are?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. These are important issues, and clearly we will be represented at the most senior level possible. It may

be difficult for a Minister to be present, but we will ensure that our ambassadors and other leading figures in the Foreign Office are there to make the case to which he refers.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Was the Minister as appalled as I was last week that it took an order from the European Court of Human Rights to force the Orbán Government in Hungary to provide food to the starving asylum seekers being held at the border? Further, has the Foreign Office protested to the Orbán Government about this disgraceful episode?

Mark Field: Clearly this is something that causes great concern. The shadow Minister will be aware that it is not an issue for which I have direct responsibility, but I know my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas will ensure that our embassy in Budapest is in a position to make the case in the way he has expressed it. Obviously we will try to return to the House at some point with more information, or do so in writing.

Topical Questions

T1. [909462] **Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I will travel to Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates later this week to add further impetus to the peace process in Yemen. My aim is to build on the agreement reached in Stockholm in December, which allowed a sustained reduction in fighting in the port of Hodeidah, and to encourage all sides to carry out the redeployments they agreed at Stockholm. This may be one of the last opportunities to prevent a return to fighting and secure desperately needed humanitarian aid.

Chris Evans: According to Oxfam reports, 6,400 people are being held in Libyan detention camps, which is the result of a deal between Libya and Italy. They have been trying to escape across Europe, only to be returned to Libya. They face malnutrition, violence and human trafficking. Has the Foreign Secretary spoken to Italy and Libya about this deal?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East, who has responsibility for north Africa, spoke to the Libyan Foreign Minister about that issue yesterday, and I spoke to the Italian Foreign Minister last week about immigration issues more generally.

T2. [909463] **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): This Government have done great work supporting marine conservation around the world, but will my right hon. Friend outline what plans the Department has to support the marine protected area around the pristine waters of Ascension Island? This would cost as little as £120,000 a year to enforce and oversee, which represents good value.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): As pioneers of the first marine protected area in the Southern ocean, the UK is working actively to see

new designations in the Weddell sea, the east Antarctic and around the Antarctic peninsula. Ascension Island intends to designate a marine protected area this year, and a consultation is under way.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are in an invidious position in that they have the temporary peace and stability that they desperately want and need but a new President for whom they did not vote. Does the Secretary of State agree that we cannot simply shrug our shoulders and say this is a trade-off that we accept but that, instead, the people of the DRC deserve both peace and democracy?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo clearly voted for change in December 2018. We urged the Government to hold elections in line with the accord of Saint-Sylvestre. The elections took place on 30 December, and the official announcement has gone against what some observers felt was the case, but the UK is engaging with President Tshisekedi and his team following the elections. We clearly believe that the Congolese people voted for change, and we believe that the new Government need to be as inclusive as possible.

T4. [909466] **Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): I welcome the work of the Foreign Office last year in hosting a major international conference on tackling the illegal wildlife trade, but what assessment has the Foreign Office made of the recent decisions made by Japan and Iceland to resume whaling? What steps will the Government take to encourage our friends to change their mind?

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The UK is disappointed that Japan has announced that it will withdraw from the International Whaling Commission in order to resume commercial whaling, and we urge it to rethink its decision. The Prime Minister raised this with Prime Minister Abe on 10 January, confirming that the UK is and remains strongly opposed to commercial whaling.

T3. [909464] **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): More than 1 million Venezuelan refugees who have been forced to flee Maduro's humanitarian catastrophe are now in Colombia. I have a large, vibrant Colombian community in Southwark who are very worried about the knock-on impact of that crisis on their country, and on family and friends. What support and resource are the Government giving to the Colombian Government to manage this situation?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are working closely with the Colombian Government in defending the continuation of the peace process. They have borne a massive burden of people who have left Venezuela, and we are at the forefront of European efforts to make sure that we can find a solution in Venezuela, in response to the absolutely unacceptable conduct of Mr Maduro.

T5. [909467] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Along with the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), I was in Kosovo last week representing the all-party group. Ministers will be aware of the concerns about

land swap talks between Kosovo and Serbia. What assessment have the Government made of this and other potential changes to borders in the western Balkans?

Sir Alan Duncan: As I set out to the Foreign Affairs Committee last September, the Government's assessment is that border changes in the western Balkans would risk instability and contagion in the region and beyond. We support efforts to reach a normalisation agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, one that is deliverable and sustainable, and enjoys wide domestic support in both countries. We would support such an agreement.

T8. [909471] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Family members of the London-based human rights defender Sayed Alwadaei had their sentences upheld yesterday in Bahrain in what the UN has described as a reprisal case, one that has been condemned by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Will the Government call for their release?

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I was in Bahrain last week, where I met the chair of the independent monitoring committee, who has taken a special interest in some of the cases that have been raised in the UK to make sure that proper human rights are available to those who have been convicted in Bahrain. We still monitor a number of cases, but I urge people to go through that independent process because we are confident that it is genuinely independent and it is making a difference to the administration of justice in Bahrain.

T6. [909469] **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What difficulties face the fair and effective delivery of the £200 million that the Prime Minister has pledged to Yemen?

Mr Hunt: We think that that £200 million will mean that 3.7 million people get access to food they would not have otherwise had and 2 million get access to sanitation and fresh water. This will make a significant difference, but the most important thing of all would be to stop the fighting in Hodeidah to allow the Red sea mills to be opened up and food to be transported to the capital, Sana'a.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My constituent Luke Symons has been held for some considerable time as a captive in Sana'a, and his family feel that the Foreign Office is not doing enough. Will the Minister undertake to give priority to this case, so that Luke can get out of Yemen with his family and back to the UK?

Mr Hunt: We continue to have contact with Luke's family. This is a very distressing case. We are not able to offer consular assistance in Yemen. We appreciate that he was in Yemen before the conflict broke out and we will continue to exert every effort we can to try to find a way to get him home.

T7. [909470] **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm what support the UK is providing to Ukraine to ensure that its merchant and naval shipping can have free access to its ports across the sea of Azov?

Sir Alan Duncan: Russia's action against Ukrainian vessels near the Kerch straits on 25 November was not in conformity with international law. Continued Russian restrictions on access to the sea of Azov should be ended immediately. We have worked with our partners to support Ukraine, including through securing political agreement in the EU for new sanctions listings, targeted on those responsible for the attacks on the Ukrainian vessels.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): EU observers saw that

"violence has marred the election day, and significant obstacles to a level playing field remained in place throughout the...electoral campaign".

What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the rights of minorities during election time in Bangladesh?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his heartfelt question. We were clearly concerned by the outcome of the elections in Bangladesh, and we are waiting for the Electoral Commission to come up with its full report. One aspect of it clearly has to do with various minorities in the Bangladeshi state. I shall be visiting Bangladesh in the course of the next six weeks and hope to be able to write to the hon. Gentleman in due course to answer his question in full.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend will have been as shocked as I was to see the appalling scenes of Venezuelan troops using violence and intimidation to prevent vital aid from entering their country, which has been ravaged by socialism for decades. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on all parties around the world, and in particular the Labour leadership in this House, to condemn utterly Maduro's actions and his illegitimate regime in Venezuela?

Sir Alan Duncan: Any and every decent person in this House utterly condemns the barring of much needed humanitarian aid from getting into Venezuela. We all stand together in condemning those who are preventing that much needed source of supplies.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Several British overseas territories are still refusing to implement full transparency and to have public registers of ownership. Why are the Government refusing to obey the command of this House, which was to introduce legislation swiftly? Why are they refusing to do it until 2023?

Sir Alan Duncan: We are fully adhering to the obligations and requirements of the Act that was passed. The hon. Gentleman is quite right that 2023 is the date by which we hope every requirement will be met in respect of public registers.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Minister update us on what steps are being taken to support recently liberated areas in Iraq?

Alistair Burt: Significant ones. I was in Iraq two weeks ago and met the new President of Iraq, and its Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Iraq knows that it must complete its introductory reconstruction efforts. It is important that those who have been abandoned in the Nineveh plain are able to get back, but the security

situation remains crucial. Only when there is a strong security situation, organised and controlled by the state, will it be safe for everyone to go back. The United Kingdom is playing a leading part to encourage and support the efforts to promote reconstruction and the safety of those who have been displaced.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Fourteen million people in Yemen face the threat of starvation because of a blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia. How can the Government ever justify selling a billion pounds' worth of weapons per year to a country that is deliberately using famine as a weapon of war?

Mr Hunt: Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that if we had followed his policy and stopped our strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia, there would be no peace process in Yemen and we would not have the first prospect for four years of solving the problem.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The recent terrorist attack by the group Jaish-e-Mohammad in Pulwama, where 49 Indian servicemen and women lost their lives, has been widely condemned. Will my right hon. Friend utter a clear and unreserved condemnation of this suicidal attack and call on Pakistan to stop funding these terrorist groups?

Mark Field: The UK Government unequivocally condemn the appalling terror attack in Pulwama on 14 February. We are actively encouraging the Governments of both India and Pakistan to find diplomatic solutions and to refrain from actions that could jeopardise regional stability. We are also working in the UN Security Council to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I have a wonderful Chagossian community in Wythenshawe. In the light of yesterday's International Court of Justice decision, what does the Minister have to say to that community?

Sir Alan Duncan: I repeat what I said earlier: the court decision yesterday was an advisory opinion, not a judgment. We will continue to uphold our commitments, as we have frequently stated in this House.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What work are the Government doing to support relations and enhance the interaction between all political groups, in both opposition and government, in Iraq?

Alistair Burt: The formation of the Iraqi Government and the efforts being made—in particular by the President of Iraq, who is from the Kurdish region—to ensure better relationships between Irbil and Baghdad certainly seem to us to be paying dividends. Every effort is being made to enable the relationships to become stronger so that reconstruction right throughout Iraq can take place and it can once again be a strong and independent country in terms of its foreign policy, and serve all its people.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of the detriment that older people experience globally, what steps is the Foreign Secretary taking to advance a UN convention for the rights of older people?

Mr Hunt: It is an issue that I have a great deal of interest in because of my previous role. I can assure the hon. Lady that, having the third largest development budget in the world, we continue to champion this issue at every opportunity.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The stability of Lebanon is vital to the wider security situation in the middle east. It has taken Prime Minister Hariri nine months to put together a Government that reflects all the different complex denominations and sects in Lebanon, including several Ministers from Hezbollah. What discussions have the British Government had with Prime Minister Hariri or the Lebanese Government about the proscription of the political wing of that organisation?

Alistair Burt: By good fortune, the Prime Minister and I met the Prime Minister of Lebanon on Sunday at the summit in Sharm el-Sheikh. We were able to discuss not only the issue relating to Hezbollah, but our own efforts to support the stability of the Government of Lebanon. Prime Minister Hariri recognised the support that the United Kingdom gave. We want to see Lebanon's Government formation completed and also for the Government to go forward economically, a process in which our own investment conference in December was a landmark event.¹

Leaving the European Union

12.36 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government's work to secure a withdrawal agreement that can command the support of this House.

A fortnight ago, I committed to come back before the House today if the Government had not by now secured a majority for a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration. In the two weeks since, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Attorney General and I have been engaging in focused discussions with the EU to find a way forward that will work for both sides. We are making good progress in that work. I had a constructive meeting with President Juncker in Brussels last week to take stock of the work done by our respective teams. We discussed the legal changes that are required to guarantee that the Northern Ireland backstop cannot endure indefinitely.

On the political declaration, we discussed what additions or changes can be made to increase confidence in the focus and ambition of both sides in delivering the future partnership we envisage as soon as possible, and the Secretary of State is following this up with Michel Barnier.

I also had a number of positive meetings at the EU-Arab League summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, including with President Donald Tusk. I have now spoken to the leaders of every single EU member state to explain the UK's position. And the UK and EU teams are continuing their work, and we agreed to review progress again in the coming days.

As part of these discussions, the UK and EU have agreed to consider a joint workstream to develop alternative arrangements to ensure the absence of a hard border in Northern Ireland. This work will be done in parallel with the future relationship negotiations and is without prejudice to them. Our aim is to ensure that, even if the full future relationship is not in place by the end of the implementation period, the backstop is not needed because we have a set of alternative arrangements ready to go. I thank my hon. and right hon. Friends for their contribution to this work and reaffirm that we are seized of the need to progress that work as quickly as possible.

President Juncker has already agreed that the EU will give priority to this work, and the Government expect that this will be an important strand of the next phase. The Secretary of State for Exiting the EU will be having further discussions with Michel Barnier and we will announce details ahead of the meaningful vote. We will also be setting up domestic structures to support this work, including ensuring that we can take advice from external experts involved in customs processes around the world from businesses that trade with the EU and beyond—and, of course, from colleagues across the House. This will all be supported by civil service resource as well as funding for the Government to help develop, test and pilot proposals that can form part of these alternative arrangements.

I know what this House needs in order to support a withdrawal agreement. The EU knows what is needed, and I am working hard to deliver it. As well as changes to the backstop, we are also working across a number of

other areas to build support for the withdrawal agreement and to give the House confidence in the future relationship that the UK and EU will go on to negotiate. This includes ensuring that leaving the EU will not lead to any lowering of standards in relation to workers' rights, environmental protections or health and safety. Taking back control cannot mean giving up our control of these standards, especially when UK Governments of all parties have proudly pursued policies that exceed the minimums set by the EU, from Labour giving British workers more annual leave to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats giving all employees the right to request flexible working. Not only would giving up control go against the spirit of the referendum result—it would also mean accepting new EU laws automatically, even if they were to reduce workers' rights or change them in a way that was not right for us.

Instead, and in the interests of building support across the House, we are prepared to commit to giving Parliament a vote on whether it wishes to follow suit whenever the EU standards in areas such as workers' rights and health and safety are judged to have been strengthened. The Government will consult with businesses and trade unions as it looks at new EU legislation and decides how the UK should respond. We will legislate to give our commitments on both non-regression and future developments force in UK law. And following further cross-party talks, we will shortly be bringing forward detailed proposals to ensure that, as we leave the EU, we not only protect workers' rights but continue to enhance them.

As the Government committed to the House last week, we are today publishing the paper assessing our readiness for no deal. I believe that if we have to, we will ultimately make a success of a no deal. But this paper provides an honest assessment of the very serious challenges it would bring in the short term and further reinforces why the best way for this House to honour the referendum result is to leave with a deal.

As I committed to the House, the Government will today table an amendable motion for debate tomorrow. But I know Members across the House are genuinely worried that time is running out—that if the Government do not come back with a further meaningful vote, or they lose that vote, Parliament will not have time to make its voice heard on the next steps. I know too that Members across the House are deeply concerned by the effect of the current uncertainty on businesses. So today I want to reassure the House by making three further commitments. First, we will hold a second meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March at the latest. Secondly, if the Government have not won a meaningful vote by Tuesday 12 March, then they will, in addition to their obligations to table a neutral, amendable motion under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, table a motion to be voted on by Wednesday 13 March, at the latest, asking this House if it supports leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement and a framework for a future relationship on 29 March. So the United Kingdom will only leave without a deal on 29 March if there is explicit consent in this House for that outcome.

Thirdly, if the House, having rejected leaving with the deal negotiated with the EU, then rejects leaving on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement and future framework, the Government will, on 14 March, bring forward a motion on whether Parliament wants to seek

a short, limited extension to article 50, and, if the House votes for an extension, seek to agree that extension approved by the House with the EU and bring forward the necessary legislation to change the exit date commensurate with that extension. These commitments all fit the timescale set out in the private Member's Bill in the name of the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). They are commitments I am making as Prime Minister, and I will stick by them, as I have previous commitments to make statements and table amendable motions by specific dates.

But let me be clear—I do not want to see article 50 extended. Our absolute focus should be on working to get a deal and leaving on 29 March. An extension beyond the end of June would mean the UK taking part in the European Parliament elections. What kind of message would that send to the more than 17 million people who voted to leave the EU nearly three years ago now? And the House should be clear that a short extension—not beyond the end of June—would almost certainly have to be a one-off. If we had not taken part in the European Parliament elections, it would be extremely difficult to extend again, so it would create a much sharper cliff edge in a few months' time. An extension cannot take no deal off the table. The only way to do that is to revoke article 50, which I shall not do, or to agree a deal. I have been clear throughout the process that my aim is to bring the country back together. This House—*[Interruption.]* This House can only do that by implementing the decision of the British people, and the Government are determined to do so in a way that commands the support of this House.

But just as Government require the support of this House in delivering the vote of the British people, so the House should respect the proper functions of the Government. Tying the Government's hands by seeking to commandeer the Order Paper would have—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. This is rather discourteous. The Prime Minister is delivering a statement, and it should be heard. I understand the strong feelings, but colleagues know from the record that everybody will get the chance to question the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's statement must be heard.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Tying the Government's hands by seeking to commandeer the Order Paper would have far-reaching implications for the way in which the United Kingdom is governed and the balance of powers and responsibilities in our democratic institutions, and it would offer no solution to the challenge of finding a deal that this House can support. Neither would seeking an extension to article 50 now make getting a deal any easier. Ultimately the choices we face would remain unchanged: leave with a deal, leave with no deal, or have no Brexit. When it comes to the motion tomorrow, the House needs to come together, as we did on 29 January, and send a clear message that there is a stable majority in favour of leaving the EU with a deal.

A number of hon. and right hon. Members have understandably raised the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. As I set out last September, following the Salzburg summit, even in the event of no deal, the

rights of the 3 million EU citizens living in the UK will be protected. That is our guarantee to them. They are our friends, our neighbours and our colleagues. We want them to stay. But a separate agreement for citizens' rights is something the EU has been clear it does not have the legal authority for. If it is not done in a withdrawal agreement, these issues become a matter for member states, unless the EU was to agree a new mandate to take that forward.

At the very start of this process, the UK sought to separate out that issue, but the EU has been consistent on it. However, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has written to all his counterparts, and we are holding further urgent discussions with member states to seek assurances on the rights of UK citizens. I urge all EU countries to make this guarantee and end the uncertainty for these citizens. I hope that the Government's efforts can give the House and EU citizens here in the UK the reassurances they need and deserve.

For some hon. and right hon. Members, taking the United Kingdom out of the European Union is the culmination of a long and sincerely fought campaign. For others, leaving the EU goes against much that they have stood for and fought for with equal sincerity for just as long. But Parliament gave the choice to the people. In doing so, we told them that we would honour their decision. That remains the resolve of this side of the House, but last night we learned that it is no longer the commitment of the Leader of the Opposition. He has gone back on his promise to respect the referendum result and now wants to hold a divisive second referendum that would take our country right back to square one. Anybody who voted Labour at the last election because they thought he would deliver Brexit will rightly be appalled.

This House voted to trigger article 50, and this House has a responsibility to deliver on the result. The very credibility of our democracy is at stake. By leaving the EU with a deal, we can move our country forward. Even with the uncertainty we face today, we have more people in work than ever before, wages growing at their fastest rate for a decade and debt falling as a share of the economy. If we can leave with a deal, end the uncertainty and move on beyond Brexit, we can do so much more to deliver real economic progress to every part of country.

I hope tomorrow this House can show that, with legally binding changes on the backstop, commitments to protect workers' rights and the environment, an enhanced role for Parliament in the next phase of negotiations and a determination to address the wider concerns of those who voted to leave, we will have a deal that this House can support. In doing so, we can send a clear message that this House is resolved to honour the result of the referendum and leave the European Union with a deal. I commend this statement to the House.

12.50 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I would like to start by thanking the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement.

I have lost count of the number of times the Prime Minister has come to this House to explain a further delay. They say history repeats itself—the first time as

[Jeremy Corbyn]

tragedy, the second time as farce—but by the umpteenth time it can only be described as grotesquely reckless. This is not dithering; it is a deliberate strategy to run down the clock. The Prime Minister is promising to achieve something she knows is not achievable and is stringing people along, so will she be straight with people? The withdrawal agreement is not being reopened. There is no attempt to get a unilateral exit on the backstop or a time limit.

In Sharm el-Sheikh, the Prime Minister said that

“a delay in this process, doesn’t deliver a decision in parliament, it doesn’t deliver a deal”.

I can only assume she was being self-critical. She has so far promised a vote on her deal in December, January, February and now March, and she only managed to put a vote once—in January, when it was comprehensively defeated. The Prime Minister continues to say that it is her deal or no deal, but this House has decisively rejected her deal and has clearly rejected no deal. It is the Prime Minister’s obstinacy that is blocking a resolution, so if the House confirms that opposition, then what is the Prime Minister’s plan B?

I pay tribute to others across the House who are working on such solutions—whether that is the proposal that is commonly known as Norway-plus or other options. Labour, I would like to inform the House, will back the Costa amendment if tabled tomorrow, and I also confirm that we will back the amendment drafted by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) on securing citizens’ rights for EU citizens here and for UK citizens in Europe, some of whom I met in Spain last week.

The Prime Minister has become quite the expert at kicking the can down the road, but the problem is that the road is running out. The consequences of running down the clock are evident and very real for industry and for people’s jobs. For now, the Prime Minister states that the can can be kicked until 12 March, but the EU cannot now ratify any deal until its leaders summit on 21 March. After all, section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act states that the final agreement will be laid before this House before it can be voted on, so can the Prime Minister confirm how there can be a vote in this House if the EU has not yet agreed any final exit, or is the Prime Minister now saying that there will be no change to either the withdrawal agreement or to the political declaration, so we will be voting again on the same documents?

Every delay and every bit of badly made fudge just intensifies the uncertainty for industry, with business investment being held back, jobs being lost and yet more jobs being put at risk. The real life consequences of the Prime Minister’s cynical tactics are being felt across the country, with factories relocating abroad, jobs being lost and investment being cancelled. Thousands of workers at sites across Britain’s towns and cities are hearing rumours and fearing the worst. The responsibility for this lies exclusively with the Prime Minister and her Government’s shambolic handling of Brexit. Even now, with just one month to go before our legally enshrined exit date, the Prime Minister is not clear what she wants in renegotiations that have now dragged on since it

became clear in December that her deal was not even backed by much of her own party, let alone Parliament or the country at large.

Labour has a credible plan—[*Interruption.*] Labour has a credible plan that could bring the country together, provide certainty for people, and safeguard jobs and industry. It is based around a new customs union with the EU to protect our manufacturing industry, close alignment with the single market to protect all of our trading sectors and keeping pace with the best practice on workers’ rights, environmental protections and consumer safeguards. The people of this country deserve nothing less. The Prime Minister talks about giving commitments on future developments, but that is way short of a commitment to dynamic alignments on rights and standards when we know many on her Front Bench see Brexit as an opportunity to rip up those vital protections.

In recent weeks, I have been speaking to businesses, industry organisations and trade unions. Last week, along with our shadow Brexit Secretary, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and Baroness Chakrabarti, I travelled to Europe to meet EU officials and leaders to discuss the crisis and explain Labour’s proposals. We left with no doubt whatsoever that our proposals are workable and could be negotiated, so tomorrow we will—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I indicated to the House that the Prime Minister should be fairly and courteously heard, and the same goes for the Leader of the Opposition. If the usual suspects could just calm down, it would be in their interests and, more importantly, those of the House.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Tomorrow, we will ask Parliament to vote on these proposals—they are workable and negotiable—which back the demands of working people all across this country and industry all across this country. I urge Members across this House to back that amendment to respect the result of the 2016 referendum and to safeguard jobs, investment and industry in this country. Labour accepts the result of the 2016 referendum, but we believe in getting the terms of our exit right, and that is why we believe in our alternative plan.

The Prime Minister’s botched deal provides no certainty or guarantees for the future, and was comprehensively rejected by this House. We cannot risk our country’s industry and people’s livelihoods, so if it somehow passes in some form at a later stage, we believe there must be a confirmatory public vote to see if people feel that that is what they voted for. A no-deal outcome would be disastrous, and that is why we committed to backing the amendment, in the names of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), to rule out that reckless cliff-edge Brexit.

The Prime Minister appears to be belatedly listening to the House. Any extension is necessary only because of the Prime Minister’s shambolic negotiations and her decision to run down the clock, but until the Prime Minister is clear about what alternative she would put forward in those circumstances, then she is simply continuing to run down the clock. She promises a short extension,

but for what? If the Government want a genuine renegotiation, they should do so on the terms that can win a majority in this House and on the terms, backed by businesses and unions, that are contained within Labour's amendment, which I urge the whole House to back tomorrow.

The Prime Minister: I will first respond to a couple of the right hon. Gentleman's questions. He asked about the meaningful vote and whether new documents would be brought before the House. Of course, we are in discussions with the EU about changes—changes that this House said it wanted—to the Northern Ireland backstop. We are discussing those with the European Union. Any changes that are agreed with the European Union would be put before this House before the meaningful vote.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of citizens' rights. As I covered in my statement, the EU does not have the legal authority to do a separate deal on citizens' rights without a new mandate. This is a matter, unless it is part of the withdrawal agreement—obviously, we have negotiated something within the withdrawal agreement; good rights for citizens within the withdrawal agreement—for individual member states. We have taken up the issue with individual member states. A number of them have already given good guarantees to UK citizens and we are encouraging those that have not to do so.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to workers' rights. I think it is important. [*Interruption.*] I am answering the points that he has made, but he does not seem to be too interested in listening to the answers that I am giving. He advocated dynamic alignment on workers' rights. I have to say that we on the Government side of the House think that those decisions should be taken in the UK, and in this House. One of the reasons for taking those decisions on workers' rights in this House, as I have said, is that Governments in this country, of different colours, have consistently given greater rights to workers than the European Union has negotiated.

The right hon. Gentleman referenced the Labour party's approach to a deal. Of course, its approach is that it wants a customs union, to be in the single market and to have a say on trade deals, in a way that says, "Well, please, if you're very nice to us, can we sit around the table and maybe some time we might be able to put an opinion on the trade deals?" If he wants the benefits of a customs union—no tariffs, no fees and no charges—they are there within the political declaration, in the deal that has been negotiated by this Government. In that political declaration, we also have the right for us, as an independent country, to strike our own trade deals again, and not to have to rely on those struck in Brussels.

The right hon. Gentleman then spoke about the time running down to 29 March. My sole focus throughout all of this has been on getting a deal that enables us to leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. It is the right hon. Gentleman who has kept no deal on the table, by refusing to agree to a deal. He talks about uncertainty on jobs, but he could have voted to end uncertainty on jobs by backing the deal the Government brought back from the European Union.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman says that he and the Labour party accept the result of the referendum, yet we also know that they back a second referendum.

By backing a second referendum, he is breaking his promise to respect the result of the 2016 referendum. He will be ignoring the biggest vote in our history and betraying the trust of the British people.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on accepting that we are not remotely ready for the chaos of a no-deal departure on 29 March? I agree with her that no deal at any time would bring very damaging medium and long-term prospects for the British economy and our wellbeing. I will continue to vote for any withdrawal agreement that she manages to get with the other EU countries, but I doubt that she will command a majority for any such agreement in the near future.

Can I turn to the real issue now? How long is the delay that we are contemplating? The Prime Minister seems to be giving us a date for a new cliff edge at the end of June, but is not the danger that we will merely continue the present pantomime performance through the next three months, and that the public will be dismayed as we approach that date and find that there is similar chaos about where we are going?

May I suggest that we contemplate a much calmer delay, that we have indicative votes following debates in this House, to see where a consensus or majority lies, and then that we prepare our position for the much more important long-term negotiations that have to take place on the eventual settlement? We cannot have several more years of what we have had for the past two years. We have to start proper negotiations with the EU on what exactly we contemplate as our long-term relationships with the Union.

The Prime Minister: Of course, we have the framework for that long-term relationship with the European Union set out in the political declaration—that is the set of instructions to the negotiators for the next stage—but my right hon. and learned Friend is right that we still have to go through that second stage of negotiations. He asked about any extension to article 50, should that be necessary. I am very clear that I do not want to see an extension to article 50. Should we be in the position that such a proposal was put before this House, I would want it to be as short as possible.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. I have to say that I find myself once again agreeing with the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). There is the possibility that we will extend article 50 beyond the end of June. In the light of that, may I give a helpful suggestion to the Prime Minister? The Scottish National party is already putting in place candidates for the European elections. May I suggest that the Conservatives consider doing the same?

There are only 19 parliamentary days until Brexit day, yet the Prime Minister wants to delay the meaningful vote until 12 March—why? From 12 March, there are only 10 parliamentary days before Brexit. We will have lost nine days in which this issue could have been resolved. The Dutch Prime Minister says:

"We are sleep walking into no deal scenario."

There was no breakthrough in the 45-minute meeting with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel. Council President Donald Tusk said that an extension of article 50

[*Ian Blackford*]

would be the “rational” decision. Although, that would suggest that this Government are capable of making rational decisions—there is little evidence of that.

Prime Minister, your strategy to run down the clock is disastrous. Is it not the case that you have continued to fail to reach an agreement on the backstop? Is it not the case that you cannot get the alternative arrangements on the backstop that you promised at the end of—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not trying to get any alternatives to a backstop. Speak through the Chair, man.

Ian Blackford: Mr Speaker, is it not the case that the Government cannot get the alternative arrangements on the backstop that were promised at the end of January, because the EU will not renegotiate? The EU has repeatedly made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is non-negotiable. What does the Prime Minister not get about that?

Prime Minister, businesses and citizens are worried about no deal—worried about the supply of medicines and food. It is the height of irresponsibility for any Government to threaten their citizens with such consequences. The Prime Minister sits and laughs at what she is doing to the people of the United Kingdom—what a disgrace! This Prime Minister indicates that she is simply not fit for office. Prime Minister, will you accept the overwhelming advice of business, MPs and your Cabinet? Rule out no deal and extend article 50, but do it today. This should not be left until the middle of March.

Mr Speaker, we cannot trust this Prime Minister. Parliament should take the opportunity to impose the timeline that she has set out today, so that she cannot dodge this.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman made various references to the discussions with the European Union. He asked why the meaningful vote was not being brought back this week, or before the latest date of 12 March. The answer is that we are taking this time to negotiate the changes required by this House to the deal that we negotiated with the European Union. That includes the work that has been done on alternative arrangements. As I indicated in my statement, further work on those alternative arrangements has already been agreed with the European Union. There were all those questions about there not being an opportunity to renegotiate or get any changes, but that is not the case; we are in talks with the European Union and we are talking about the issues that this House required.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talked about uncertainty: the uncertainty of not having the arrangements in place. If he wants to end uncertainty and if he wants to deal with the issues he raised in his response to my statement, then he should vote for a deal—simples.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I appeal to the House to give the right hon. Gentleman the respectful attention that he probably wants and I think he should have.

Mr Duncan Smith: Very kind of you, Mr Speaker. I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Clearly, she is right that we would prefer to have a deal. In the statement, she talked about alternative arrangements, which are based, it appears, on the Malthouse compromise details. May I remind my right hon. Friend that it is clear, behind closed doors, that UK Government officials and the EU recognise that what is currently in the backstop is unworkable and that they will therefore have to implement alternative arrangements? When she sits down with them to ask for that, could she now say that those alternative arrangements must reach a point of a deadline date and be bound legally, so that they cannot renege from that after we leave?

The Prime Minister: In fact, there has not been the suggestion that the arrangements in the backstop are unworkable. What there has been in the discussions with the European Union is an acceptance of the desire to discuss those alternative arrangements, work on them, and have them in place such that, were it the case that we ended the implementation period without the future relationship in place and that insurance policy for no hard border in Northern Ireland was necessary, we would have the alternative arrangements to put in place, rather than the backstop as it is currently within the withdrawal agreement. One of the key issues raised by the European Union around the alternative arrangements actually relates to the significant number of derogations from European Union law that will be necessary to put the alternative arrangements in place.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): While I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has, at long last and with the greatest reluctance, been persuaded by a group of her own Ministers to accept that there is no majority in this House for leaving the European Union on 29 March with no deal, does she not understand that in all likelihood there will continue to be no majority in the House for leaving with no deal, whether it is March, June or October? Therefore, the question I want to put to her is this: if we are going to have an extension to article 50, what does she intend to use that time for?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear that I want the work we are currently doing to ensure that we get a deal that can command the support of this House. What I said in my statement is that if we lose another meaningful vote, we will then put a vote to the House on its view on leaving the European Union on 29 March with no deal. Were it the case that the House rejected the meaningful vote and voted for not leaving without a deal, then a motion would come before the House in relation to a short, limited extension of article 50. The right hon. Gentleman talks again—he has raised this previously in the House—about there being no majority for leaving with no deal. As I say, the House has to face up to the fact that if it does not want to leave with no deal then either it wants to stay in the European Union, which would betray the trust and the vote of the British people, or it has to accept and vote for a deal.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Today’s statement cannot have been easy for the Prime Minister to make, because she is rightly determined that we should honour the result of the referendum. I say that as somebody who campaigned very strongly for us to remain in

the EU. But it probably has not been greeted with great alacrity in the country, because the uncertainty out there, affecting businesses and individuals, is now crushing. Can she please make it clear that a deal which can command a majority of this House is eminently possible if there can be agreement on changes to the backstop and putting in place alternative arrangements? Can she also confirm that it is then incumbent on MPs on all sides of the House to vote for this deal, which will be in the national interests of this country?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. First, in the talks with the European Union we are discussing delivering the changes required by this House regarding its concern about the potential indefinite nature of the backstop. There is the prospect—I believe we have it within our grasp—to get an agreement such that we can leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. When those changes are brought back I hope, as my right hon. Friend says, that every Member of this House will recognise their responsibility to deliver on the vote of the referendum in 2016 to deliver Brexit, and to do it in the best way possible, which is with a deal.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said, for the first time, that she is willing to put a motion extending article 50. I hope that reflects the strong arguments that have been made from all parts of the House about the damage no deal would do to this country. But she will also know that promised votes have been pulled before, that Commons motions have been ignored before, and that when the Commons previously voted against no deal the Brexit Secretary told the House that Government policy was still to leave on 29 March with no deal if the deal had not been passed. He said:

“Frankly, the legislation takes precedence over the motion”.—*[Official Report, 14 February 2019; Vol. 654, c. 1070.]*

If there is no legislation in place, what assurances do we have that: votes will definitely be put; the Government will abide by any motions; and the entire Cabinet will abide by any votes? What will the Government’s policy be in those circumstances? Will it be to argue for no deal or will it be to argue for an extension?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Lady references the Cabinet. This has been discussed by Cabinet, so this is a position that the Government have taken. I would not have brought it before the House today if it were not a position that the Government had taken on this issue.

I have set those dates. If she would care to look at what I have been doing over recent weeks, she will see the points where I have said I would come back today. On the previous time I came back to the House there was a guarantee that I would come back to the House. I said I would bring a motion, and we brought a motion. We will bring a motion tomorrow. So there is a clear and firm commitment from this Government to ensure that we bring those votes to this House. The House then has that opportunity.

I recognise the concern of right hon. and hon. Members to ensure that the voice of the House is heard. That is why I said that those votes will be brought before the House should we lose the meaningful vote. I continue to

want to see this House supporting a meaningful vote, so that we can leave with a deal. As she will have heard in my statement, in the case that a vote for no no deal and then a vote for an extension had been put forward, we would take that to the European Union. The decision would not be entirely ours. There has to be a unanimous decision of the 27 member states of the European Union to agree that extension, but were that agreed, we would bring forward the necessary legislation.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend accept that the Bill to delay article 50, to which the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) has just referred, would incur many billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money that would otherwise be available for public services and would otherwise not be handed over to the EU if we left on 29 March? Will she also accept that the Bill is effectively aimed at overturning the democratic will of the British people, which Parliament itself expressly entrusted to the British people and must be honoured?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a number of points about the Bill proposed by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. Given the commitments the Government have made in relation to these issues, I hope Members would consider that the mechanisms in the Bill have constitutional implications beyond simply the Brexit issue, in terms of the relationship between Government and Parliament, and our democratic institutions going forward. I have been clear today. I want to see a deal that this House can support and which enables us to leave on 29 March with a deal. That is what the Government are working on and that is what the Government continue to work on.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister is right that simply postponing a cliff edge for three months is pointless or worse, but now that the Leader of the Opposition has listened to advice from his colleagues, Liberal Democrat Members and others and accepted the principle of a people’s vote with the option to remain, will she not listen to the advice of her own Ministers, who are saying that a no-deal Brexit—whether at the end of March or the end of June—would be so damaging that it must now be firmly ruled out?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman yet again that he talks about firmly ruling out a no-deal option and there are only two alternatives to no deal: one is to revoke article 50 and stay in the European Union, which we will not do, and the other is to agree a deal. If he wants to take no deal off the table, I hope that when the deal is back, he will vote for that deal.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): It is abundantly clear just from listening to the questions today that there is not a consensus in this House and that we do face gridlock. We have now run down the clock, and rather than wasting more time repeating votes that we have already had and that this House has already expressed its will on—for example, on no deal and on the Government’s deal and the withdrawal agreement—is it not now time that we all put our effort into recognising the gridlock and taking responsibility for deciding how we get out of it? I do not believe that it is going to change and we can keep on going round in circles, with

[Justine Greening]

all the damage that that does to businesses and jobs, or we can confront it, decision it and find a route forward for Britain.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I recognise that my right hon. Friend feels very strongly about these issues. I want to see us able to deliver on the result of the referendum and to do that in what I believe is the best way for this country, which is to leave with a deal. That is what we will be working on. She talks about decision points. There will be a decision point for this House in a meaningful vote, looking at the changes that have been agreed with the European Union, and at that stage, I hope that every Member of this House will recognise the need to respect the result of the referendum in 2016 and to leave the European Union with a deal.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is not the crucial difference between what the Prime Minister is proposing and the proposal of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), who chairs the Home Affairs Committee, that theirs is watertight and legally binding and that the Prime Minister's is not. Given the number of times that she has gone back on her word and caved in to the European Research Group, why should we trust anything she is saying?

The Prime Minister: There is a difference between the proposal that the right hon. Gentleman refers to and the commitments that I have given today—that is, the proposal that has been put forward goes much wider than the issue of Brexit. I have a concern about the future relationship between the Government and Parliament—about ensuring that we can continue to maintain what has been a balanced relationship between the Government and Parliament that has stood this country well over many years and about retaining that into the future.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Brexit Secretary on persuading the European Union to accept a taskforce to work up the alternative arrangements group's proposals into a practical proposition, because what has emerged from our discussions is that the customs arrangements have been cut and pasted from the old Turkish agreement. They are archaic and would require 255 million pieces of paper to be stamped with a wet chop, as in Ming dynasty China. If the Prime Minister could make these proposals legally binding with a definitive implementation date, she would remove the toxic backstop and get many Government Members to vote for the agreement. Will she get a legally binding change in the text to deliver that?

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that the commitment is that we will ensure, as I said to our right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), that were we to get to the point of it being necessary to exercise what is known as the backstop, or the insurance policy for no hard border in Northern Ireland, at the end of the implementation period where it is necessary, we want to

have the alternative arrangements ready to go at that point such that the backstop, as currently drafted, never needs to be used. That is the aim and the intent. We want to work on this quickly so that we have those clearly ready and understood before that date, but the commitment is to ensure that those alternative arrangements can indeed replace the backstop and ensure that it does not need to be used.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Prime Minister's withdrawal deal agreement as proposed in draft was defeated in this House by 230 votes—she hardly needs reminding of that—and the reason primarily for the loss of the majority was the backstop. She has committed to binding legal changes in terms of the backstop, effectively reopening the withdrawal agreement, and she must know that without a legally watertight way out of the backstop, we certainly could not support any future withdrawal agreement brought to this House. Does she think that the machinations of some of her Ministers and the proposals that she has announced today will have the effect in Brussels and on European leaders of making them more likely to concede what is necessary or that perhaps they will just sit back and wait?

The Prime Minister: The discussions I have had in the European Union with EU leaders and, indeed, with the European Commission are very clear: they are entering into those talks with us with the intention of finding a resolution to the issue that this House has raised and that the right hon. Gentleman has just referenced again—that is, to ensure we have that legally binding change that ensures that people can have the confidence that the issue that the House raised about the potential indefinite nature of the backstop has been addressed and resolved. That is what we are working on. I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has always been consistent in his references to the need for the right legal status for that change, and that is what we are working for.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am pleased to hear from my right hon. Friend a willingness to consider the possibility of an extension of article 50 to prevent a catastrophic no-deal Brexit. She also said, rightly, that across this House there are widely divergent views on why the deal that she has negotiated in good faith has been rejected. My concern is simply this: I see no reason to think that that situation will change, because despite what she has done in good faith, it is a second-rate outcome for our country. If this is to continue, how are we indeed to break the logjam? And here I have to say to her that her browbeating of the House, which she did today—indicating that unless we simply go along with a deal that is considered to be inadequate, there is no solution but a no-deal Brexit or a unilateral revocation—is simply inaccurate, because surely it is perfectly possible and utterly democratic for us to go back and ask the public whether the deal she has negotiated is acceptable or not.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend says that there are diverse views around this House and that there has been no indication, therefore, why the withdrawal agreement was rejected. Indeed, the House did indicate why the withdrawal agreement was rejected. It did so in a majority vote on 29 January that indicated

that it was an issue around the backstop, that changes to the backstop were required and that the House would support the withdrawal agreement with the necessary changes to the backstop. It is not right to say that this House has not indicated the result that it wishes to see. He also aims slightly to chastise me on the options that I have put before the House today, but I say to him that a second referendum does not change the fact that ultimately, the three options open to us are to leave the European Union with a deal, to leave it with no deal, or to have no Brexit. Those will remain the options.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): This is a shameful moment. Nothing has changed—apart from the fact that some of us who used to sit on the Government side are now sitting on the Opposition side. One of the reasons for that is that yet again we see from the Prime Minister can kicking at the same time as fudge is being created and a failure to put the country and the nation's interests first. Instead, the future of the Conservative party is put first and foremost. Right hon. and hon. Members who sit on the Government side made it clear that they would vote in accordance with their consciences and the national interest—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Blunt—be quiet. Be quiet. You are not the arbiter of what the right hon. Lady says. I will be the judge of that. Do not try to shout her down. It is beneath you—and more importantly, it will fail.

Anna Soubry: Actually, I did not hear what the hon. Gentleman said; that is the benefit of being older and a bit deaf, Mr Speaker.

In any event, the important point is this. Right hon. and hon. Members on the Government side—those in government, and senior Back Benchers—made it very clear that they would vote to take no deal off the table, break a three-line Whip and, if necessary, either resign or be sacked from the Government. Will the Prime Minister confirm that indeed nothing has changed and that no deal remains firmly on the table?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady talks about acting in the national interest. At every stage of this, the national interest has been the focus of the work that I have been doing. That is why I negotiated what I believe to be a good deal with the European Union. That deal was indeed, as others have referenced, rejected by this House. It is why I have then listened to the views of this House on what the House wanted to see changed in the withdrawal agreement and in the package negotiated, to ensure that the House could support that package. That is why we are in talks with the European Union on that. That is why I intend to work to bring back to this House changes that this House can support and changes that ensure that we will be able to leave the European Union, and do so with a deal.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Most of my constituents are in awe of the stoic way in which the Prime Minister has acted over these past two years, dealing with a subject that no other Prime Minister has ever had to deal with. There is no book to go and check what happened before: she is breaking new ground.

Can the Prime Minister tell me, though, what she thinks is the maximum extension she would seek to our withdrawal?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. My view on this is very simple. First, I do not want to see an extension—[*Interruption.*] Yes, it is very simple. Secondly, were there to be an extension, I believe that it should be as short as possible. It is already the case that we are nearly three years on from the referendum in 2016. People who voted for us to leave the European Union are rightly questioning that timetable and want to see us actually leaving the European Union. Should the House vote for a short limited extension, I would want to see that being as short as possible.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister was worrying that the Bill of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) would set a precedent. But there is a very easy solution to this: the Prime Minister could bring forward that Bill in Government time, as a Government Bill, and whip for it. My suspicion is that the Prime Minister is yet again leaving herself wriggle room on the issue of no deal. We have already voted against no deal in this House. She says she is going to allow us a vote on no deal, but then she says that no deal will still be on the table even if we do that. Will she confirm, yet again, that there will be no legal impediment to no deal at the end of this process? So what is this extension for?

The Prime Minister: What we have seen, of course, is that, yes, the House voted in the way the hon. Gentleman indicated, but we are now working with the European Union. We will bring changes agreed with the European Union back to this House for a further meaningful vote. Members of this House will then have the opportunity to determine whether they want to leave the European Union with a deal or not. Should they reject no deal, the further votes that I have given a commitment to will take place.

Mr Speaker: Mr Blunt, having heard you—it was rather unwelcome—from your seat, perhaps we can now hear you on your feet.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I rather suspect that given all the enthusiasm that Brenda of Bristol had for the last general election, the prospect of an extension of this debate for several months will be received with dismay by the country. However, underneath that dismay is massive uncertainty. There is a real price for extending this debate, and I urge my right hon. Friend to stick to her guns and make sure that there is a choice between her deal and leaving to World Trade Organisation terms. That is the choice that the European Union faces, which hopefully will bring it to end the backstop, and that is the choice that the Labour party should face as well.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that we can indeed bring an end to the uncertainty. We can do that. I believe that the best way to do that is through a meaningful vote in this House to support the deal that the Government will bring back from the European Union.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We all know that no deal would be an absolute catastrophe on so many different levels. Does the Prime Minister acknowledge that her own deal will have a huge impact on the economy as well? Cutting immigration of EU nationals by 80% will be the ruination of many cities and towns across our country.

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Lady that we now have the opportunity, as a result of leaving the European Union, to put a new immigration system into place—yes, to bring an end to free movement once and for all; that was an important element of the referendum debate and the reason why, I think, quite a number of people voted to leave the European Union. We can now put in place an immigration system based not on where somebody comes from, but on the skills they have and the contribution they will make to this country.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has perambulated from one part of the Chamber to another, but fortunately I can still see him. He is now next to the Father of the House—a very important position.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that warm-hearted introduction.

There may be a special place in hell for those of us who want a clean break with the European Union, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there will be the devil to pay for any party that tries to hold a second referendum to reverse the result of the first one?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. Our party campaigned to respect the result of the referendum and the Labour party campaigned saying that it would respect the result of the referendum. It is important that we do just that.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): As we speak, the Prime Minister's Government are preparing to apply tariffs to basic food items such as cheese and meat, the price of which will be paid by families in this country who have suffered enough. Is this really the Tory party that the Prime Minister thought she would lead—banging on about Europe, all the while creating new burning injustices every day it is in office?

The Prime Minister: We have negotiated a deal with the European Union that is very clear on the issue of no tariffs. It is open to Members of this House, with the changes that will be brought back following our discussions with the European Union, to support that deal.

I also say to the hon. Lady that this Government have been dealing with a number of burning injustices in this country, which were not dealt with by a previous Labour Government. I cite things like the action we have taken on stop and search, in relation to mental health and on the race disparity audit.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Clearly, having no deal with our largest trading partner is deeply unattractive, which is why I have supported the deal. The Government position has been to leave with a deal, and the Conservative party manifesto was very clear that we wanted both a trade deal and a customs arrangement. If we do get to

12 March and, unfortunately, the deal is not accepted, will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government's position will remain that we want to secure a deal and that, if our negotiators need that little bit more time, the Government will not be whipping their Ministers to block the extension?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in saying that the Government have been very clear throughout all this that we believe that the best route for the United Kingdom is to leave the European Union with a deal. That will continue to be this Government's position. I want to work to ensure that the situation she refers to does not arise because we are able to get that agreement in the meaningful vote and get a deal agreed.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister explain how she intends to obviate the need for checks on rules of origin without accepting common external tariffs? Is it not the case that the only realistic way of meeting that commitment in the political declaration is to negotiate a new customs union with the EU?

The Prime Minister: We put forward proposals on how we could achieve that some months ago, and there will of course be a debate on the balance between alignment and checks when we come to the next stage of the negotiations.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The withdrawal negotiations are nearing their final, most crucial and most delicate stages. Against that background, does my right hon. Friend not agree that talk from certain quarters of her Government of immediately extending the article 50 process and taking no deal off the table is simply giving succour to our interlocutors in Brussels, and, if anything, undermining the position of the British negotiators?

The Prime Minister: As I have said on a number of occasions, simply extending article 50 does not resolve the issue of the decision that the House will have to make. When the time comes, it will be for every Member of the House to decide whether we should respect the result of the referendum and whether we should do that by leaving with a deal, with the changes that will be achieved through the negotiations that are currently being undertaken with the European Union. However, that choice—no deal, a deal, or no Brexit—will be before every Member when the time comes.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I always admire a good U-turn on either side of the House, and I am delighted to welcome the Prime Minister's screeching U-turn today and her acceptance that the House must have a chance to vote against no deal; but can she be clear, because she has not been thus far? If we have that vote on 12 or 13 March, will her Government be voting in favour of no deal or against it?

The Prime Minister: I am hearing conflicting views from across the Chamber. On one hand I am told that nothing has changed, and on the other hand I am told that we have done a U-turn.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): The Prime Minister was told a long time ago that this would be the easiest deal in history, and that we would be in an implementation period and not a transition period. Given the importance of the future trade arrangements to this country, will she commit herself to ensuring that red lines are put before Parliament for Parliament's democratically elected representatives to vote on, in relation to the future trade agreement? That is the way to ensure that the credibility of our democracy is not undermined.

The Prime Minister: Let me give my hon. Friend some reassurance. I have indicated on a number of occasions in the House that as we look to that next stage of the negotiations—which will indeed cover the trade relationship that we will have with the EU in the long term, but also other issues such as our security arrangements, and some underpinning issues such as the exchange of data—we will be seeking more involvement from Parliament, and my right hon. Friends the Brexit Secretary and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster are considering what form that interaction with Parliament should take in the future.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): European leaders have made it pretty clear that they would only agree to an extension of article 50 for a good reason, not just to enable the Prime Minister to faff and dither and delay and do some more can-kicking down the road. That extension must be for a purpose. Will the Prime Minister therefore make another U-turn and support the proposal for a confirmatory public vote, which is now gaining support on both sides of the House?

The Prime Minister: I have made my views on this issue clear on a number of occasions in this Chamber. There are those who are talking about a confirmatory vote on the deal, and including on that ballot paper the option of remaining in the European Union.

Caroline Lucas: Yes.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady says yes to that. I have to say to her that it would not be respecting the result of the referendum, and that 80% of the votes cast in the last general election were for parties that said they would respect it.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the whole history of the European Union has shown that time and again, when there are intractable disputes, agreement is obtained, often late at night, with about an hour to go before the clock runs out? Will she therefore stick to her deadline, and will she impress on the European Union that there is a majority in the House for her agreement if the necessary changes to the backstop can be made?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for drawing attention to that issue in relation to the European Union. We are indeed in the process of those talks with the European Union, and have made clear to it that—as the vote in the House showed—there is support for a withdrawal agreement provided that we can see those necessary changes in relation to the backstop.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I feel so enraged this week by the complete and utter lack of bravery to do the right thing for our country. Perhaps it is because I have spent my week in my constituency trying to put out the burning injustices that the Prime Minister's Government have started where I live. I will not sit one more day and listen to the Prime Minister crow about employment going up, while where I live employment is falling and hunger is rising. I currently have one midwife—one!—for the entirety of my constituency. There are people in my constituency who are living in hotels, and who have to move out because Crufts is coming to Birmingham.

Will the Prime Minister do a brave thing and do, once, what is best for the country, not what is best for any of us? Will she be brave, and will she at least answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith)? Will she at least vote against no deal herself?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the passion with which the hon. Lady has made the point about her constituency, but time and again I am asked questions in the Chamber the implication of which is to try to deny the facts of the situation that are before us. The facts of the situation are very simple. The House will have a decision to make, but only three options will be before it: to leave the European Union with a deal, to leave without a deal, or to revoke article 50 and have no Brexit. I have made clear that the last of those options is one that I will not support, and I believe that the House should not support it, because it would be going back on the result of the referendum.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I do believe that the Prime Minister has shown some courage today, because there is some welcome pragmatism in what she has announced. She has acknowledged the fear that people have of time running out, and, like the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), the desperate need of the businesses in our constituencies to have certainty. Without a doubt that certainty can be provided by Parliament's voting for her deal when she puts it forward, but given that it may not be carried, will she confirm that the UK will now only leave the EU without a deal if Parliament explicitly provides consent?

The Prime Minister: As I said in my statement, if when we bring the meaningful vote back Parliament rejects that meaningful vote, we will table a motion to ask Parliament its view on whether or not we should be leaving without a withdrawal agreement and a future framework. On that basis, we would only leave without a deal with the consent of Parliament. But I echo the point that my right hon. Friend made at the beginning of her question: the best thing for Parliament to do is to vote for a deal, such that we can leave with a deal.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The first thing that South Wales police raised with me when I was elected in 2001 was the problem they were experiencing with obtaining up-to-date information from other police forces in Europe so that they could tackle paedophilia in the south Wales valleys. We have managed to achieve obtaining that over recent years, as I am sure the Prime Minister knows from her time as Home Secretary, but if we leave without a deal—as she rightly said in her first letter to

[Chris Bryant]

the European Union triggering article 50—we will not have a deal on security, and that means that the police, from the day afterwards, will not have access to that information. How are we going to make sure that we are safe if we proceed down the no-deal path?

The Prime Minister: Let me say first to the hon. Gentleman that I do indeed recognise the issue that he has raised. One of the early things that I did when I became Home Secretary was agree that the United Kingdom should be part of the European Investigation Order. I stood at this Dispatch Box while the hon. Gentleman's right hon. and hon. Friends tried to prevent me from ensuring that we could keep measures such as the European arrest warrant.

Let me also say to the hon. Gentleman, however, that I believe that leaving with a deal is the right thing to be done for this country, for a variety of reasons. Most people focus on the trade and customs issues, but the security issues are just as important. That is why obviously in no-deal preparations we work with others across the European Union to see what arrangements can be in place in a no-deal, but it is also why the deal we have negotiated is the best thing to happen, because it allows us access to key areas such as the passenger name records and Prüm.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend please confirm whether over the last fortnight in conversations with EU members she has heard anything to suggest that any EU country would fail to give us an extension to article 50, and if that is the case what those reasons might be?

The Prime Minister: I have not been discussing with individual member states an extension to article 50; what I have been discussing with them is what the UK Parliament requires—what this House requires—in order to get the change that would secure a majority in this House for the withdrawal agreement. However, the point is very simple: were it to be the case that an extension of article 50 were requested by the UK, that would require the unanimous consent of all 27 members of the European Union. I have not had that discussion with them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will remember that I started off feeling sympathetic to her, especially when she began saying that she wanted to talk to people, and then I felt rather sorry for her. But I have to tell her on behalf of my constituents and myself that I feel very frightened by what she has said today. I believe that the Prime Minister has lost her sense of direction and lost the real message that every Prime Minister should have in mind. Forget about referendums—I think of Mussolini when I think of referendums. The responsibility of the Prime Minister is the national interest and the health, welfare and prosperity of the people we all represent. Will she remind herself of that, face down the people on her Back Benches, and do something that delivers to this House? There is a two thirds majority for a sensible conclusion; let us bring those on all the Benches together and discuss this. Two thirds of the Members in this House want a sensible solution.

The Prime Minister: I am thinking precisely of the national interest when I sit down with the European Commission and other European Union leaders with a view to negotiating changes to the withdrawal agreement and the package we agreed, such that we can bring that back to this House and get agreement for a deal.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So that I can prepare to realign myself to the metaphysical plane: what is my right hon. Friend's estimate of the possibility of our leaving on time?

The Prime Minister: It is my estimation that it is within our grasp to get changes such that we can bring a deal back to this House to enable this House to confirm in a meaningful vote its intention to leave the European Union with a deal on 29 March.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): For 22 years I have served the constituents of Don Valley, and I have dealt with many constituents and their plights. At no time in those 22 years have they looked to the EU to supply the answers to the injustices they have faced, whether in terms of poverty or housing or having a decent education or health service; a Labour Government supply the answers to those issues. That is why it is so important to recognise that in this House there are people on the remain and the leave side for whom no deal will ever be good enough. The time has come to recognise, as is said in the first line of the first leaflet of the 2017 election from Labour, that the decision to leave has been made by the British people. We said in the relevant chapter of our manifesto that we are here to negotiate Brexit, not stop it. Does the Prime Minister agree that she needs to show compromise, but so does everybody else in this House?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. Compromise is necessary of course and we have seen compromise already in relation to the deal that has been negotiated, but the right hon. Lady is absolutely right to point out, as I referenced earlier, that 80% of the votes at the last general election were cast for parties that were clear in their manifestos that we would respect the result of the referendum, and we should be doing just that. I believe the best way to do that is to leave the European Union with a deal, and I intend to bring a deal back to this House of Commons that I would hope and expect the House can support.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Is it not still the reality that the withdrawal agreement—warts and all, amended or not—remains the only serious show in town if we are to leave the EU, and does the Prime Minister think that if this deal keeps getting voted down by this House she will need to stand alongside the Leader of the Opposition, go on television and explain and level with the British public why this House is institutionally and politically incapable of delivering Brexit?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are seeking changes to the withdrawal agreement, but the bulk of it remains the same. It is about intricate issues such as the legal aspects for those businesses that have contracts with the European Union after we leave the European Union, and citizens' rights

and ensuring the guarantees and protections for citizens' rights. He says that in the event that this House did not vote for a deal I should stand by the Leader of the Opposition and explain why this House had not voted for a deal; that might be a little difficult because, given his new policy, the Leader of the Opposition does not seem to want to deliver Brexit.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Prime Minister's language, borrowed from the extremists, in describing the Bill from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) as commandeering the House is totally irresponsible. Does the Prime Minister not understand that this is a parliamentary democracy, that we own the Standing Orders and that we can vote to change them either permanently or temporarily at any time?

The Prime Minister: Of course it is absolutely right that the Standing Orders of this House can be changed by this House; in recent times the Standing Orders of this House have often been interpreted in ways that were not expected.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The vast majority of my constituents in Gloucester would echo every word the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) said; they voted and the country voted to leave and we in our manifestos chose to respect the result of that referendum. So there is no question about us leaving; the only issue at stake, and the only issue my constituents worry about, is the inability of this House to get behind the Prime Minister and resolve the withdrawal agreement Bill. Given that business, and particularly manufacturing, is hurting and will hurt with every day going forward, will my right hon. Friend confirm that if she can agree with the European Union the changes she is rightly looking for before 12 March, she will come back to this House earlier and put the question as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the point he makes; he is absolutely right that the vast majority of members of the public want to see this House delivering leaving the European Union and doing so in the best way for this country, and we will be working to ensure we get those changes as soon as possible. When I said there will be a vote by 12 March, I meant that that is the last date for a vote, and if it is possible to bring it earlier I will do so.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Listening to this mess it is no wonder that in Scotland the EU is more popular than the UK. The only sovereign decision this Parliament can take is to revoke article 50, to prevent leaving without a deal. An extension to article 50 means the Prime Minister has to beg the EU27 and put the UK at the mercy of the kindness of the EU27. Does she not agree that revoking article 50 is better than leaving without a deal, which is the current trajectory for the UK given the letter she wrote on 29 March 2017?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree that revoking article 50 is a better route for this country. Members across this House gave people in the country the opportunity

to decide whether to leave the European Union or not; they voted to leave the EU and I believe it is imperative that we respect that vote and deliver on that vote.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): When the Prime Minister brings her deal back to the House of Commons I will vote for it the second time; as the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has said, it is time and we need to support the deal. If the deal, however, does not succeed in the House, will the Prime Minister then give the House the option of voting for Britain joining the European free trade area—Common Market 2.0, the Norway option—which commands support from across the House and from some Eurosceptics such as Daniel Hannan?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for the commitment that he has given in relation to the meaningful vote. I think he is trying to step forward to a stage beyond, when we have taken those other votes through this House. As I say, the first aim of the Government, and my first aim, is to bring back a meaningful vote that can command support across the House, such that we are able to leave with a deal. I believe that the arrangements within the political declaration have significant benefits in relation to issues such as customs and also provide for us to have an independent trade policy and no free movement. Those are important elements of what people voted for in 2016.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I am glad the Prime Minister has finally recognised that if she cannot get her agreement through, we will need to extend article 50 to avoid the risk and disruption of no deal on 29 March, but like many others, I fear that we will just end up here again at the end of any extension, however long it might be, because the Prime Minister will not change course. She keeps talking about the facts, but there are different facts out there, if only she would open her eyes. Is it not the truth that she could get her agreement through if she changed her red lines and worked across the House, or if she had the courage of her convictions and put her withdrawal agreement back to the public? That is the way to break the Brexit deadlock.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady knows my answer in relation to putting the deal back to the public. I believe it is our job to respect the result of the referendum and to deliver on that. There are those who wish to put that deal back to the public against a no deal, and those who wish to put it back to the public against remaining in the European Union. I think that remaining in the European Union is not the right course for us to take. We should be leaving the European Union, and the best way to do that is with a deal.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Public trust in this institution is low and falling. I welcome the Prime Minister's statement that she, this Government and this party will honour the referendum result. She, like me, campaigned for remain, and we are equally committed to getting a deal. I beg colleagues who do not think that this deal is perfect to vote for it so that we can move on and deliver what the British people asked for. In the event that the House rejects the Prime Minister's deal again, which I hope it does not, and rejects no deal, can

[George Freeman]

we use the extension period to reach across the House—in the spirit of what the right hon. Member for Don Valley has said—and look at EFTA instead of the backstop, and at other variations? We need to deliver a Brexit in the national interest, not party interest.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that we are working to deliver a deal in the national interest. We have reached across the House, although we have so far had limited discussions with those on the official Opposition Front Bench. We are happy to continue those discussions with the Opposition Front Bench, but we have also been talking to Members from across the House. It is important that we get a deal that the House is able to support, and the stronger the support across the House, the better that will be.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister can surely not be unaware of the fear out there in the country about what no deal means. Surely her constituency surgeries, like mine, are full of people who cannot sleep at night for worrying about their businesses and their jobs and because of the fear of no deal. She has told us today that in the event of her deal being rejected again by this House, there will be a vote on 13 March to take no deal off the table. I will vote to take no deal off the table. She has been asked several times today about this, and she has lectured us all about personal responsibility, so how will the Prime Minister herself vote in those circumstances? If the House votes down her deal and she brings forward that motion, how will she vote? It is not just MPs who deserve an answer; it is the public.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady misses out a stage. There is a stage before we get to that point, which is the vote in this House on the meaningful vote and the deal, and I can assure her that I will be voting for a deal.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): May I gently remind the Prime Minister that we trade on World Trade Organisation terms with the rest of the world outside the EU and that we do so very profitably? She should not be deflected. Colleagues knew what they were voting for when triggering article 50. A concern must be that, at this crucial stage of the negotiations with the EU, the Prime Minister's next steps will now make a good deal less likely, because the EU will hope that Parliament will defeat no deal and extend article 50. When I voted against the Iraq war, I knew that I had to resign to do so. Has the time not come to face down those Ministers who have threatened to resign, in order to ensure that we achieve the best possible chance of a good deal?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to achieve the best possible chance of a good deal. Actually, we trade with other parts of the world on terms that are part of the EU's trade agreements with those other parts of the world, and we have been working to ensure that those would continue in the event of no deal, should there be no deal. I think that he and I are of one mind in that we want to leave according to the timetable that has been set and to leave with a good deal for the UK.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Prime Minister is now countenancing an extension to article 50. May I ask her to do the same in relation to a people's vote, and to acknowledge that a people's vote in a fair campaign, devoid of the extensive cheating of the campaign 900 days ago, is the best way of uniting the country around either her deal or staying in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the answer that I have given to that question earlier this afternoon, and indeed to the answer that I have given to the same question that he has asked me in every statement I have made on this issue in recent months.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for coming to the House yet again to update us on the European Union. She has been tireless in keeping the House informed, and her ability to keep going and trying to get a deal is welcomed across the House. I do hope that she will be able to come back with a deal that the whole House can vote for. However, if that is not the case, she has said 108 times that we will leave the European Union on 29 March, and if that is not possible, does she not think that the country will regard that as a betrayal?

The Prime Minister: What the country wants is to see us delivering on Brexit and delivering leaving the European Union. The timetable of 29 March was set and accepted by the House when it accepted the vote on article 50. As I have said, I want us to be able to do that and to leave on the basis of a deal, and we will be continuing to work to ensure that we can do that. The important issue that Members must consider when they come to vote on the next meaningful vote is delivering on Brexit and giving the public the reassurance that we are actually going to do what they asked us to do.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): What would be the better democratic outcome for the country: accepting a second-rate deal resulting in a second-rate future, or holding a second public vote asking the public whether they support or reject a second-rate future for their children and grandchildren?

The Prime Minister: I think the best thing for the democratic health of this country is to deliver on the referendum result of 2016. As the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has pointed out, people from across the House have campaigned on a manifesto to respect the referendum and deliver on Brexit. And the deal before the House is not a second-rate deal; it is a good deal for the UK.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is encouraging to hear from my right hon. Friend that, in her words, good progress has been made towards securing an alternative to the vexed issue of the backstop, but it is critical that hon. and right hon. Members have the opportunity to consider such new arrangements in advance of any vote. Is she confident that we will indeed have that opportunity in advance of the vote on 12 March?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that Members will have. Of course, the bulk of the proposals that will be put back would be the withdrawal agreement

and the political declaration, which have already been considered by the House, but I am clear that Members will need to have an opportunity to look at any changes that have been made and to consider them before they vote in the House.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has been forced to admit today for the first time that we do not have to leave without a deal on 29 March unless Parliament explicitly approves it. However, there is little point in applying for a two-month or three-month extension simply to carry on the same circular discussions with the same parliamentary gridlock. If we are to apply for an extension of the article 50 period, would it not be better, rather than specifying a time, to secure an extension for a purpose, which should be clarity on our future relationship with the EU? The lack of clarity is not down to the national interest, but because it is in the Conservative party's interest not to have to face up to the fundamental choices posed by Brexit.

The Prime Minister: No. We have considerable detail in the political declaration—more than many people thought it would be possible to achieve at this stage. It is not possible to have a legal text, but the EU cannot agree legal texts with us until we are outside the EU. People are focusing on an issue at the heart of the future negotiations, which is the question of the balance between alignment with rules on goods and agricultural products and checks at the border. The spectrum is identified in the political declaration, because the UK Government's clear position is that we are aiming for and want to work towards frictionless trade, and the EU is concerned about the impact of that on the single market. It is that discussion between the UK and the EU that is at the heart of the political declaration.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): In seeking to limit us either to an agreement that ties us to the EU without a clear end, an extension of this corrosive period of limbo, or a second public vote, does the Prime Minister share my profound democratic concern that Members of this House are contriving to deny those whom we serve any option that honours the referendum result?

The Prime Minister: As I have said on many occasions, I am clear that we should honour the result of the referendum. I believe that the deal we put before the House, which was rejected by the House, did that. The deal that we will bring back will reflect the work that we have done with the European Union in response to concerns that have been raised by this House. I expect and hope that I will be able to bring back a deal that Members across this House will see is the best way for us to leave the European Union.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): From what the Prime Minister says, I understand that from her point of view the backstop is the crux of the matter. She stated:

"We discussed the legal changes that are required to guarantee that the Northern Ireland backstop cannot endure indefinitely" but then she stopped, so what progress has been made to date in relation to those legal changes?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we are in discussions about the legal changes. The hon. Lady says that it appears from listening to me that the issue is the backstop. Actually, this House made it clear that the issue was the backstop, because that is how this House voted on the 29 January.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): First it was a people's vote, and now it is a confirmatory vote. Are not hon. Members using these euphemisms because, in reality, their proposal is for a second referendum and, by definition, they are dishonouring the result of the first? Will the Prime Minister accept that many of us who fought hard for remain nevertheless accepted the result that the British people had given us and wished to implement that result? We have no admiration whatsoever for hon. Members who campaigned for the referendum, who stood on a manifesto to implement the result, who supported the referendum decision in a vote, who voted to trigger article 50 less than two years ago, and who now are in plain sight reneging on those promises.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Whether it is called a people's vote or a confirmatory vote, it is a second referendum. It is putting the decision back to the British people. We said that we would honour the decision, the Labour party stood on a manifesto of respecting that decision, and we should both do just that.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she wants to unite the nation and this House, and she has again presented us today with her deal, no deal or no Brexit. Her deal faced the biggest ever defeat in this place, and no amount of backstop tinkering is going to change things for us on the Opposition Benches. Given that no deal has already been rejected twice by this House, what contingency planning she has done for no Brexit in the same way as for no deal, the assessment of which she is publishing today? If she will not rescind article 50, will she not accept that, ostensibly, the only sensible thing to do with 800 hours to go is to put her negotiated settlement back to the people, so that we can get a fresh assessment of the will of the people—the most accurate one—and then that can prevail?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer that I gave to that question earlier.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I encourage the Prime Minister to continue her discussions with our European friends. May I gently warn the House against prejudging the outcome of those discussions, which I have heard decried across this place during these exchanges? Whatever happens over the next few days, weeks and hopefully not months, I know she will agree that holding a second referendum would be an affront to the people of Basildon and Thurrock, who knew full well what they were doing, and 73% of whom voted to leave.

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we should honour the referendum result. We stood on a manifesto to do that, and other Members of this House stood on a manifesto to respect the referendum, and we should deliver Brexit.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I hope the Prime Minister will forgive me when I say that every time she makes a promise from that Dispatch Box it is met with cynicism among the Opposition because of the number of promises she has broken and the number of votes in this House that she has decided not to take forward. That has been emphasised further today by her failure to answer a simple question: when the Division bell rings in this House to prevent no deal, will she vote for or against?

The Prime Minister: As I have said to other hon. Members and to others outside this House, one of the frustrations in this debate is the way in which people will not focus on the immediate issue before us. The immediate issue before us is negotiating changes to the deal such that we can take a meaningful vote in this House on a deal to leave the European Union.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Yesterday, I was contacted by an engineer working for a laser manufacturer in Rugby involved in highly competitive export markets. As 29 March gets closer, he is very concerned about the viability of his company and the future of 100 jobs as a consequence of tariffs and delays that would be involved in no deal. How will the Prime Minister's statement today set my constituents' minds at rest?

The Prime Minister: I hope that my hon. Friend's constituents will take some reassurance from the fact that the Government are having constructive talks with the European Union and making progress in relation to the changes that this House has required to the withdrawal agreement and to the package that was agreed with the European Union in November, such that we can take a vote and leave the European Union on 29 March with a deal. I hope they will also take some reassurance from the fact that if this House again votes to reject that deal, I have set out the steps that would be taken in relation to further votes on no deal and on an extension to article 50.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): With every answer that the Prime Minister gives from the Dispatch Box, there is a collective sinking of hearts in the country, because she seems to engage in nothing but wishful thinking, and the country is fed up with watching its Prime Minister chase unicorns. Will she please confirm in what specific circumstances she believes, or has been told, that this one-off extension to article 50 will be granted by the EU? What specifically would she use that time to achieve?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, I have not discussed an extension of article 50 with other leaders around the European Union table. However, the European Union—in the form of the EU Council and the European Commission—has made it clear that it would expect any extension to be on the basis of a clear agreement that there was a plan for achieving the deal. I want to ensure that we can achieve the deal before we get to that point, and if the hon. Lady is worried about uncertainty in the House, it is very simple: vote for the deal.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I voted remain in the referendum but, just like the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), I completely accept the

result and the fact that I stood on a manifesto committing me to implement it, but the official Opposition have dishonoured their own manifesto with the U-turn that they announced yesterday. Despite its imperfections, I also accept that the currently proposed withdrawal agreement is the best way we have of implementing the referendum result, so the Prime Minister can expect my support in the Division on 12 March. However, if that is not successful, an extension strikes me as unlikely to lead to any change. Given that we have ruled out a referendum, the only remaining way of honouring the referendum result is to make a transition to WTO terms. Should the House not confront that choice now and be prepared to make that decision?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the commitment he has given. I say to him, as I have said to others, that it is the case that, when we come to look at the changed withdrawal agreement, it will be necessary for every Member of this House to ask themselves whether they want to honour the result of the referendum and, in honouring the result of the referendum, whether they wish to do so by leaving with a deal. That will be the opportunity available to Members of this House when we bring back a meaningful vote and I hope that Members on both sides of the House will vote for a deal, to leave and to honour the referendum.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Ind): The Prime Minister knows that the public are sick and tired of this impasse, born of politicians always putting their party political interests above the national interest. May I ask her not to belittle the genuine, heartfelt concern that many hon. Members have about the real lives, the real jobs and the real livelihoods that are at stake in a botched Brexit? That cannot just be swept under the carpet, and we should not just turn a blind eye. If we want to break through this gridlock, let us give the public a chance by having a people's vote now.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the uncertainty and the impact of that uncertainty on businesses and on people. The clear message I get when I speak to members of the public—I was out on the doorsteps again at the weekend—is that they want to see this resolved and that they want Parliament to get on with the job of voting for a deal and ensuring that we can leave the European Union. The hon. Gentleman knows my answer in relation to a people's vote, but were we to go for a people's vote, it would simply extend the uncertainty for a further period of time.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome the fact that, contrary to certain less than well informed opinions in this House, even among my right hon. Friend's Cabinet and junior Ministers, significant preparations have been undertaken by the EU, UK and Ireland for any eventuality. We now know, for instance, that aviation, financial derivatives, euro clearing, aerospace manufacturing, auto making, agriculture and other sectors of our economy will have access to the EU, that electricity interconnectors will be licensed, that UK insurance and extradition will be operative in Ireland and that simplified customs procedures will eliminate, or greatly reduce, checks at our borders. Three further practical enhancements to border efficiency are suggested by my work with

customs and freight operators that my right hon. Friend now has in her hands to implement in the national interest. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Be more lively, man.

Mr Fysh: Will my right hon. Friend, first, authorise intermediaries to have access to transitional simplified procedures? Secondly, will she allow them to be authorised consignees for the purpose of the transit system? Thirdly, will she instruct the Treasury to help underwrite a scheme that allows responsible intermediaries to guarantee liabilities to customs authorities within the transit system? *[Interruption.]* This way they can shoulder much of the responsibility for customs away from the border—

Mr Speaker: Order. Resume your seat, Mr Fysh. *[Interruption.]* Order. I indulged the hon. Gentleman, whose sincerity I greatly admire, but may I very politely suggest that he needs to develop some feel, some antennae, for the House? The House's fascination with his points is not as great as his own.

The Prime Minister: First, the issues to which my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Fysh) refers—the measures indicated by the European Union—would only be there for a temporary and limited period. Secondly, he gives a long list of various issues in relation to the alternative arrangements at the border, some of which are precisely the issues that the European Union has raised a question over in relation to the derogations from EU law that would be required.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: The consequence of that question is that people are now gesticulating at me to indicate that they are going to ask very short questions. A bit of sign language is being deployed.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Brexit costs a lot, both in political energy and in diversion away from the issues that constituents raise about the NHS, schools and so on, but what has been the cost of Brexit, in pounds and pence, from when Mr Cameron announced the referendum to today?

The Prime Minister: The amount of money that the Government have set aside in relation to the work we are doing on preparedness for Brexit, for a deal and for no deal, has been clear and has been published. The Treasury has published the allocation of money to individual Departments.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will be delighted to know that I do not have a list. As my right hon. Friend is probably aware, more than 70% of the residents of Clacton voted to leave the EU. I, too, have been on the doorsteps, and I, too, have been getting a lot of mail. My residents do not want an extension to article 50, and they do not want a second divisive, and possibly destructive, referendum. Does she agree with President Juncker that it takes two to tango and that it is time the EU learned to dance?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that a second referendum would be divisive and that we must honour the result of the first referendum. I think what President Juncker said is that it takes two to tango and that he is rather good at dancing.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) invariably has a sunny disposition, so it is always a pleasure to call him.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker. I know the Prime Minister has talked about addressing the things immediately before us first, but can she put her mind to the fact that the spring statement is due on 13 March? How will today's statement affect that?

The Prime Minister: The spring statement will still go ahead.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, which bears the welcome hallmarks of British pragmatism and common sense, and I will continue to vote for her deal. She will be aware that 29 March is cast in statute law. Can she assure me and the House that, in the hopefully unlikely circumstance that we need to extend article 50, she will find Government time to ensure that we can vote on it in a proper and meaningful way?

The Prime Minister: I give my hon. Friend the reassurance he seeks that if the House rejects the meaningful vote and then votes not to leave with no deal, and then votes for a short, limited extension, we will bring forward the legislation necessary to put that in place.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Prime Minister has described her discussions with the EU as constructive. I wanted to ask what sympathy there has been in those discussions for a short extension to article 50, but she has already made it clear that she cannot answer that question because she has not had any such discussions, so when is she going to start them? At the moment, she has absurdly and irresponsibly outlined a course of action with no knowledge of whether it will be acceptable to the European Union. She therefore cannot bring the motion. If she did, and if the House went for it and the European Union said no, where would it leave us in the two weeks that would be left before 29 March?

The Prime Minister: If we were in a position where we wanted to extend article 50, it would be necessary to get the agreement of the European Union to do that. Time and again, I am asked to listen to the views of this Parliament. What I have set out in my statement is that if we were in that circumstance, a motion would be brought forward and it would be for this House to decide whether it wished to ask for an extension to article 50, and that decision would then be taken to the European Union.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I must admit to being somewhat confused following the statement, so can the Prime Minister confirm that when we vote against the deal on 12 March, as we undoubtedly will, it leads to a vote on no deal on 13 March, and that when we vote against no deal again on 13 March it leads to a vote on extending article 50 on 14 March and, if we vote for extending article 50 on 14 March, that leads to no deal coming back on the

[Jonathan Edwards]

table for the duration of the extended negotiations? Is this not the political equivalent of swimming round in circles?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the timetable I set out in my statement. I am working to bring back a deal that this House is able to agree.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister announced today that she will start the process of extending article 50 on 14 March. However, it is a two-way process. If the European Union partners are unable to deliver in 11 working days, will she revoke article 50 to stop a no deal?

The Prime Minister: Revoking article 50 is not something that can be done for a limited period of time. It means staying in the European Union, and we will not do that. We will honour the result of the referendum.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Prime Minister's argument goes, "We are leaving the EU because 17.4 million people voted for it." Let's face it, her passionate rejection of putting her deal in front of the people again is because 17.4 million people voted for "something". Can she tell us roughly how many of the 17.4 million people voted for her deal and how many, like the protesters outside, voted for leaving without a deal?

The Prime Minister: Let me say to the hon. Lady that 17.4 million people voted to leave the EU and that is what we will do.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): On a scale of one to 10, where one is low and 10 is high, how likely is it that the Prime Minister will get any meaningful changes to her withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister: I do not operate on those terms. What I operate on is going out there and working hard to get the changes that can be brought back to this House to get a deal.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Prime Minister has so far been rather slippery and spun her way out of answering a direct question that has been put by many Members across this House, so it begs to be asked again: when this House votes on taking no deal off the table, will she and her Government vote for or against that? Yes or no, straight question.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I have given earlier.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister will surely recognise that the economic uncertainty around Brexit, which is motivating many businesses, particularly those trading in services, to disinvest in part from the UK, is related not only to the events—or not—that are approaching in terms of 29 March, but to the nature of the future trade deal that Britain negotiates with the EU. Given that there is no certainty that Britain will be able to negotiate that trade deal by the end of the transition period coming up, should we

not extend article 50 for longer than the three months she has suggested to allow more time for those meaningful future trade negotiations at least to get started properly?

The Prime Minister: The detail of that trade deal for the future and the future economic and security partnership cannot start to be discussed until we are a third country: it cannot start until after we have left the EU. So extending article 50 does not enable those detailed legal discussions to take place; it merely means that they would be further delayed. [Interruption.] It is true.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What happens if the House votes against extending article 50 on 14 March? We would find ourselves having voted to leave on 29 March on the Thursday, but not being able to leave with a deal because we voted against it on the Tuesday and not being able to leave without a deal because we voted against that on the Wednesday. If we have to leave and we cannot leave with a deal and we cannot leave without one, what happens after that? Is it significant that the day after that is the Ides of March?

The Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Gentleman that this House will have decisions to take and it will have to look at the consequences of those decisions, but the easy way to ensure that he is not in the position that he sets out is to vote for the deal when we bring the meaningful vote back.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister seems incapable of thinking more than one move ahead. Clearly, she is more of a draughts player than a chess player. Let me spell out the issues here: the Prime Minister's deal has already been defeated and the House has already rejected leaving on no-deal terms. I do not see that situation changing in the next few days, so in all probability the House will vote to extend article 50. But what will the Prime Minister do, because the 27 EU states have said that they will agree to an extension only on the basis of a general election or a referendum of some description. What will the Prime Minister's negotiating basis be? What will she do if one of the EU27 happens to scupper this by vetoing it?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has layered assumption on assumption and on assumption in his question. The first stage is for us to ensure that we can bring back a deal from the European Union with the changes that this House has required such that this House will support it and we can leave on 29 March with a deal.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): In her remarks at the very beginning, the Prime Minister said:

"The very credibility of our democracy is at stake."

I agree with her, because this House voted against leaving the EU with no deal and yet this Conservative Government have not abided, in their approach, with the decision of this parliamentary democracy. So democracy is being treated with contempt by an overbearing Government. Is it not the fact that there is a conspiracy between an incompetent Conservative Government and an incompetent Labour leadership to facilitate Brexit, against the needs, interests and wishes of the majority of people in this country?

The Prime Minister: First, this House voted on 29 January that it would support leaving the EU with a withdrawal agreement, provided there were changes to the backstop. It voted to support no hard border in Northern Ireland and leaving with a deal. Secondly, it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we do deliver on Brexit. I am sure the hon. Gentleman stood on a manifesto to respect the result of the referendum. I stood on a manifesto to respect the result of the referendum and that is what I am doing.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has always said that she would not extend article 50, but I welcome the fact that she is now saying that she may get to the stage where she will extend it—I hope she would get there a lot sooner. On what grounds will she be seeking to extend it? What would she be seeking to achieve?

The Prime Minister: As I made clear earlier, I do not want to see us extending article 50. I want to see us getting a deal agreed and through this House, such that we can leave on 29 March with a deal. It will be up to this House to determine, in a vote, whether or not it wishes to extend article 50 if that meaningful vote is rejected.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): For the record, and this will not be a surprise to anybody, let me say that I will not, shall not and cannot vote for a second referendum, regardless of how much lipstick is put on it in what it is called. I think that in their heart of hearts both the Front Benchers from my party and the Government know that a majority does not exist in this House for a second referendum. That is a distraction from the main purpose of our job, which is to find a deal. I have spoken to the Prime Minister about workers' rights, funding for our towns post Brexit and what we need to do to find a way through this. Some of my colleagues have labelled those things as bribes, but they are wrong; what we are trying to do is find a constructive way forward. So in the spirit of that constructive dialogue, the Leader of the Opposition wrote to the Prime Minister to set out changes to the political declaration—not the withdrawal agreement—that would make the deal acceptable to the Labour party. May I ask the Prime Minister to seriously consider and reflect upon those, because the only way she will get a majority in this House and the majority to implement the legislation going forward is if there is a deal that is supported by the sensible mainstream bulk of both parties?

The Prime Minister: First, on the issue of funding for towns around this country, when I stood on the doorstep of No. 10 when I first became Prime Minister I was clear that I wanted a country that works for everyone. What the hon. Gentleman has referred to fits right into that desire and policy of ensuring that we are responding to the needs of people across the whole country. On the other question he has raised, the Leader of the Opposition did write to me with a number of issues and I have responded to that in writing, because a number of points he has made are actually already reflected in the political declaration. There are a number of other issues where we have taken this forward, for example, as I said today, in relation to workers' rights. My team have been

able to have one further meeting with the Labour Front-Bench team and we are happy to have further meetings with them should they be willing to have them.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Highlands and Islands Enterprise carried out a survey of businesses and firms in the highlands and islands and found that 70% of those businesses see Brexit as a significant risk for their future. More worryingly, only some 13% of these firms see themselves as being adequately prepared for Brexit. Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister gave me a helpful answer on the shared prosperity fund. I wonder whether, in the same spirit, she would consider asking Ministers or appropriate officials to meet me, representatives of HIE and business representatives from the far north of Scotland to discuss the issue and identify the best way forward.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The Business Secretary has indicated that he or a Minister in his Department would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, you will know that there is a Bill on the Order Paper today, with a Second Reading due on 13 March, to give the public a vote on the deal or the option of staying in the EU should they refuse it. Does the Prime Minister agree that, contrary to what she said before, this is not going back on the result of the referendum, but going forward, because it is asking people who voted leave in good faith whether what is being delivered is a reasonable representation of that? For example, Honda workers did not vote to leave their jobs when they voted to leave. Given that she has changed her mind on the article 50 deferral, will she not give the British people the right to change their mind in the light of the facts and give them a final vote on the deal?

The Prime Minister: Honda made it very clear that its announcement was related to changes in the global car market and not to the issue of Brexit. I have answered the question on a vote. It is so important that we actually deliver on the result of the referendum and that we do not go back to the people and ask them to think again, which is what the hon. Gentleman is suggesting.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): If this process was at all “simples”, it would be comparethesinglemarket.com, whereas the Prime Minister seems to be very much stuck in confused.com territory. For us to get a majority in this House behind any kind of deal, the Prime Minister is going to have to decide fundamentally who she wants to negotiate with. There will not be a deal that will satisfy her hardliners in the European Research Group and the majority of MPs in this House. Those two views are just not compatible, so please, put the country ahead of party interest and find a deal that can command the majority of support in this House.

The Prime Minister: I know who I am negotiating with: the deal will be negotiated between the UK Government and the European Union. This House made clear on 29 January the basis on which it was willing to accept a deal.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Prime Minister again mentioned workers' rights in her statement, yet the explanatory notes on the four statutory instruments that have been in Committee so far acknowledge that those statutory instruments do indeed weaken workers' and employment protections. Does that not show that the Government's promises on workers' rights are entirely hollow, that the best way to protect workers' rights is to remain in the European Union, and that demands for a second vote are entirely valid and legitimate?

The Prime Minister: The commitments I gave and references I made in my statement in relation to workers' rights are of course looking to what we would do in the situation where we have left the European Union. We want to continue to enhance workers' rights. As a Government we are already enhancing workers' rights—for example, through the work we have done with the Taylor review and the response to the Taylor report. The Government have a commitment to enhance workers' rights. The commitment that I have given is for those who are concerned that the European Union might in future take steps forward in relation to workers' rights and, if we were not a member of the European Union, we would not automatically be responding to that. What I have said is that when standards change in the European Union, we would ensure that Parliament would have a vote on whether this United Kingdom would follow that or not.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Ind): This House has already voted against no deal and it has already voted against the Prime Minister's agreement. The process outlined today is indicative of the Prime Minister's shocking inability to take the very difficult decision that has to be taken, which is simply that the best way to serve the national interest is to accept that in the end the only way to get her deal over the line is to offer in return a confirmative public vote. That is the only way in which this House will accept her deal. The offer is on the table—will she accept it?

The Prime Minister: I responded to the issue of a confirmatory vote, second referendum or people's vote earlier in response to a number of other questions.

I respect the way in which the hon. Lady has been a campaigner for this issue and has been consistent in that, but the best way to ensure that we get a deal through this House is to do what we are doing, which is working with the European Union to find the changes that this House indicated were such that with them it would be willing to support a deal.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Last week, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee released a report, backed unanimously by its members, on the issue of disinformation, particularly in relation to electoral campaigns. Given the release of that report and the questions that surround the leave campaigns, some of which amount to fraud on an industrial scale, before she proceeds any further, why has the Prime Minister not set up a judge-led public inquiry with the power to summon evidence and witnesses, to determine whether she is proceeding on the basis of a fraudulent campaign and a fraudulent result?

The Prime Minister: When people came to vote in the 2016 referendum, the British people knew what they were voting on, and 17.4 million of them voted to leave the European Union. We should respect that vote.

BILL PRESENTED

TERMS OF WITHDRAWAL FROM THE EU (REFERENDUM) (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Geraint Davies, supported by Mr David Lammy, Caroline Lucas, Thelma Walker, Daniel Zeichner and Tom Brake, presented a Bill to require the holding of a referendum in which one option is to approve the withdrawal agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union and the other option is for the United Kingdom to remain a member of the European Union; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Wednesday 13 March, and to be printed (Bill 340).

National Health Service (Prohibition of Fax Machines and Pagers)

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

2.45 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the use of fax machines and pagers by National Health Service bodies; and for connected purposes.

The NHS is our most valued public service. It has been there for me and my family and, like everyone in this House, I am determined to ensure its continued success. Last year's celebrations to mark the NHS's 70th anniversary highlighted some of the many breakthroughs achieved by scientists and doctors working for our NHS—breakthroughs such as proving the link between smoking and lung cancer, delivering the first in vitro fertilisation baby, and carrying out the world's first liver, heart and lung transplant. Those are just a few of the remarkable breakthroughs that have revolutionised healthcare, allowing us to live longer, healthier lives.

Just as groundbreaking as some of the health service's early achievements are those that we are seeing today, as a new wave of technological innovation transforms the way that healthcare is delivered. These new breakthroughs are fuelled by artificial intelligence, big data, robotics, wearable devices and personalised medicine. By harnessing these fourth industrial revolution innovations and embracing new digital tools, we can turbo-charge our fight against cancer, heart disease, dementia and many other illnesses. That aim is echoed in the Government's NHS long-term plan, which commits all NHS providers to achieving a core level of digitisation by 2024.

A digital-first NHS is something for which I have campaigned and which I included as a key recommendation in the report that I wrote on NHS technology with the Centre for Policy Studies last year. A digital-first NHS will mean seamless interactions between GPs, hospitals and community care. It will also mean patients not having to wait for appointments to be confirmed in the post and an end to paper records being lost. At its most cutting-edge, the key product of digitisation is personalised medicine, which takes into account a patient's genetic profile and which will become a staple in the doctors' toolbox. The future of healthcare is exciting and means that we must upgrade the NHS and its technology for the smartphone era.

Holding back the NHS from achieving that goal is an over-reliance, in some areas, on outdated technology. Equipment such as pagers and fax machines are a barrier to the NHS achieving its full potential as a truly digital health service. That is why I am introducing this Bill to ensure that NHS trusts, quangos and related organisations phase out fax machines and pagers.

Around 8,000 fax machines are used in the NHS today, making our health service the biggest consumers of fax machines anywhere in the world. These fax machines cause patients to miss appointments and hospitals to lose records, and they cost NHS bodies millions of pounds in paper storage every year, as well as being slow, unwieldy and hard to maintain. Thankfully, some NHS trusts, such as Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, have started to axe the fax, but more hospitals

need to follow. My Bill would go a step further by putting the target into law. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has pointed out, the rest of the world has transitioned from fax to email. The NHS should not be left behind.

Pagers are equally outdated in our health service. Having been first patented for use in a hospital the year after the NHS was founded, back in the 1940s, the pager's popularity peaked in the 1990s, when there were around 60 million pagers in use around the world. In the time since, pagers have little changed, and their obvious limitations have meant that most have disappeared from use—everywhere, that is, except some parts of the NHS. Just 1 million pagers are now believed to be in use around the world, yet more than 100,000 of them—10% of the entire global stock—are to be found throughout the NHS. They are now redundant, especially as NHS Digital has embarked on a project to ensure that all our hospitals have secure and reliable wi-fi access. With that project in train, there is now simply no good reason why pagers should still be used. As a result of the pager's many limitations—from allowing only one-way communication to the inability to send graphics—doctors and nurses are regularly turning to insecure instant messaging services to send patient information to colleagues without consent.

A recent *British Medical Journal* survey found that 97% of clinicians have used insecure messaging systems to send data to colleagues. Such practice should not continue. Better alternatives are available, including WhatsApp-style messenger systems such as Medic Bleep, where senders can post detailed messages and see when they have been delivered and read. In fact, a trial of the device at West Suffolk Hospital found that Medic Bleep saves nurses more than 20 minutes per shift, and doctors around 50 minutes per shift. The local NHS trust already estimates potential savings of £4.5 million per year by freeing up the equivalent of 18 full-time nurses and 18 full-time junior doctors. If replicated across the whole NHS in England, that could save the health service more than £1 billion a year. That means more time for our doctors and nurses to spend with patients and more money for frontline services.

I am grateful that this Bill has received cross-party support. I am especially grateful to the 11 co-sponsors from a range of parties. I am particularly grateful to my hon. Friends the Members for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), and the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) who are in their places in the Chamber this afternoon. They are all strong champions of the NHS in their constituencies and in this House, and I am particularly grateful for their support as this Bill makes its way through the House. I believe that safeguarding the NHS for the future benefits every community represented in this House, and I am grateful for the support of colleagues across the Chamber. By axing the fax and purging the pager, we can put in place a firm foundation on which to build a digital-first NHS—an NHS that fully harnesses the benefits of the fourth industrial revolution, and an NHS that provides our constituents with the care that they deserve. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Alan Mak, Victoria Prentis, Luke Hall, Kevin Hollinrake, Mike Tomlinson, James Cartlidge, Nigel Huddleston, Neil O'Brien, Gavin Robinson, Angus Brendan McNeil, Norman Lamb and Wes Streeting present the Bill.

Alan Mak accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 22 March, and to be printed (Bill 341).

Estimates Day

[5TH ALLOTTED DAY]

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE 2018-19

Department for Education

[Relevant Documents: Fourth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Session 2016-17, Entitlement to free early years education and childcare, HC 224, and the Government response, Cm 9351; Forty-ninth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Session 2016-17, Financial sustainability of schools, HC 890, and the Government response, Cm 9505; Fifty-Seventh Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Session 2016-17, Capital funding for schools, HC 961, and the Government response, Cm 9505; Thirteenth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Academy schools' finances, HC 760, and the Government response, Cm 9596; Seventeenth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Retaining and developing the teaching workforce, HC 460 and the Government response, Cm 9596; Forty-fifth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, The higher education market, HC 693, and the Government response, Cm 9702; Fifty-second Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Converting schools to academies, HC 697, and the Government response, Cm 9702; Sixtieth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Ofsted's inspection, HC 1029, and the Government response, Cm 9740; Sixty-ninth Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Sale of student loans, HC 1527; Seventy-third Report of the Committee of Public Accounts, Academy accounts and performance, HC 1597.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019, for expenditure by the Department for Education—

(1) further resources, not exceeding £13,388,055,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1966,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £4,460,127,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £4,775,855,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Anne Milton.*)

2.53 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Let me put on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. For some newer Members of this House who may not realise this, thanks is also owed to the Procedure Committee. When I first arrived in Parliament, it was impossible to debate proper facts, figures and the Budget in the estimates debate without being ruled out of order. The Chair of the Procedure Committee and I decided that that was not good enough and we worked together to try to make sure that we could get these debates, which are now granted by the Backbench Business Committee. I warn the Minister that we are well prepared to go through the numbers in her budget. I am sure that, as an assiduous Minister, she is well prepared to take on board our concerns and to answer them. We have worked closely with the National Audit Office in preparing for today's debate so that we can focus on the actual figures.

I know the Minister is assiduous and will not try to give us smoke and mirrors in her answers. Hopefully, she will answer not in slogans, but in actual figures.

Today, I plan to discuss the overall schools budget. I know that the Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), will also pick up on some of these issues. Other colleagues will be highlighting concerns around the spending on academies and multi-academy trusts, which, of course, report directly to the Department, teacher recruitment and retention, potentially the student loan book sales—although I see that the Member concerned is held up in a Statutory Instrument Committee—funding for Ofsted and the inspection regime; further education and higher education; and early years and special educational needs. The Minister will have her work cut out to make sure that she is over the detail, as I am sure that she is.

One reason why we wanted this debate is that the Government often repeat that more money is going into schools than ever before. In March 2017—on one of many occasions—the Public Accounts Committee looked at the sustainability of school funding. This was at the point when schools were already implementing a Government set target of £3 billion of efficiency savings—£1.7 billion of which was through more efficient use of staff, and £1.3 billion through more efficient procurement.

The House would expect the Public Accounts Committee, which I have the privilege of chairing, to be absolutely on board with the idea that schools should be as efficient as they can be, certainly with regard to procurement—where schools buy their paper or their electricity from. It is quite right that schools should be encouraged and supported to find the money that can be put into frontline teaching. We were concerned, however, that the Department did not really have a grip on what the impact of those efficiency savings would be, particularly on staff. It did not know what the impact would be in the classrooms and on the teaching in schools that had already found those efficiency savings, or on the outcomes for children.

I am delighted to see that the Secretary of State is in his place. I know that he feels passionately about the need to make sure that children are getting everything that they can from our schools. It is therefore important and incumbent on him and his Department to make sure that, when they are setting the budget or implementing efficiency savings or cuts, they understand what the impact is on school attainment. While we are discussing the budget, we must understand that, in the end, the education budget is for that range of services provided through his Department to support young people in our country.

We concluded that the Government had not done a proper assessment. It was also concerning to hear from headteachers on the frontline about the challenge of squeezing out that money in certain schools, particularly in small schools where a small percentage saving is a big chunk and could mean losing a whole member of staff even if it is not equivalent to a whole member of staff's salary.

During the general election of 2017, I was absolutely amazed and heartened by parents in my constituency and up and down the country—not political activists and not driven by political parties—talking about the impact in their child's classrooms of the squeeze on school funding.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I did a survey just before and after the 2017 general election. Out of 103 schools in Coventry, 102 were finding increases in class sizes. The cuts measured pupil by pupil amounted to £295. We had a debate yesterday about sex education in schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is another burden being loaded on to our schools? We have a situation in Coventry where schools badly need additional funding regardless of what the Government were going to allow because they are starting from a very low basis. In other words, the Government owe education £3.5 billion, despite the fact that they put in £1.5 billion.

Meg Hillier: My hon. Friend tees me up for my next point. He also raises an important point. It is a political disease to ask schools to do more all the time and very often assume that it can just be done without the additional funding. It is important that the Secretary of State and his ministerial team watch closely that, while other bits of Government suggest that schools do things, there is the funding in place for that and for the core of what they should be delivering. It was after the general election and as a result of that campaign and that pressure on the Government, who were then elected without a majority, that the Secretary of State announced £1.3 billion of additional funding, which was weighted towards next year. This year, schools are in the throes of receiving the £416 million that was announced for this year and will receive £884 million in aggregate across England for next year. But that—the £3 billion figure—does not even backfill those efficiency demands that were asked for before. It is important that we recognise—in fact, the Government have recognised this—that we need 599,000 school places, which is as a result of the increase between 2010 and 2015. We are very concerned about the pressure on school budgets.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I have often heard Ministers say in justification of restrictions on school budgets that there are large balances. In my own constituency of West Bromwich West, the cumulative shortfall in schools came to nearly £5 million between 2017-18 and 2018-19. The cumulative reserves of all the schools in Sandwell is £3 million. There is now hard evidence that the balances left in schools in local authorities are no longer adequate to meet the year-by-year shortfalls that are taking place in them.

Meg Hillier: I am going to move on, in particular, to the issue of capital funding where sometimes reserves are built up for capital funding purposes.

Looking at what is happening in schools, I really want to give the lie to the argument that more money is going into schools than ever before. The Government say that, and we can look at it in cash terms, but we need to look at it in terms of per-pupil funding. The Department is estimating that over the 2015 spending review period, pupil numbers will rise by 3.9%, or 174,000, for primary school pupils and 10.3%, or 284,000 for secondary school pupils. Therefore, funding per pupil will, on average, rise only from £5,447 in 2015-16 to £5,519 in 2019-20—next year. That is a real-terms reduction once inflation is taken into account.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a very powerful case. Does she agree that these cuts are often hurting the most vulnerable

[Caroline Lucas]

people most? Headteachers in my constituency are really concerned about teaching for special educational needs, with heartbreaking stories about schools having to lose their SEN teachers because they simply cannot afford them any more. These cuts really are having massive effects on individuals as well.

Meg Hillier: The hon. Lady raises a significant point. In my own constituency, since 2011, special educational needs provision has been backed up by the local authority through other funds that are now being squeezed because of the other funding caps.

The other point I would make very firmly to the Secretary of State is that so much of what happens in our schools is not just reliant on the Department for Education. If there are cuts in other parts of government or reductions in spending, there is a real squeeze where schools are sometimes expected to fill the gap but without the funding. This needs to be looked at in the round. We on the Committee are repeatedly concerned about what we call cost-shunting, where a saving is made in one area but the costs fall on another. A teacher or a headteacher with children in front of them in a classroom has to deal with the reality of that, and they do so very ably but often with great difficulty.

It is not just the Public Accounts Committee or the National Audit Office that is concerned about per-pupil funding. In 2018, only last year, the Institute for Fiscal Studies concluded:

“Between 2009-10 and 2017-18, total school spending per pupil in England fell by about 8% in real terms”.

In October last year, the UK Statistics Authority wrote to the DFE complaining about its misleading use of statistics on school funding. So I hope that we have nailed the lie about the funding. We need to acknowledge where we are and then we can have a debate about how much we should be funding our schools by.

In the time I have got—I do not want to take up colleagues’ time because I know that they have prepared hard for this debate—I want to touch on capital funding. I congratulate the Department and the permanent secretary on undertaking a stock conditions survey of the school estate. This is the first time that that has properly happened. It is quite shocking, really, that Governments, over time, have not done this. It is quite challenging because schools are under different ownerships. It is a good and welcome step, but of course, as the Secretary of State will know, it will throw up many issues for him. Some 60% of the school estate was built before 1976, which underlines, for those of us thinking of the schools in our constituencies, the amount of work involved. The National Audit Office estimates that £6.7 billion is needed to return all school buildings to satisfactory or better condition. They are not all to be fantastic and “all singing, all dancing” but just to be satisfactory or, in some cases, better. In 2015-16—the beginning of the spending review period—the DFE allocated £4.5 billion to capital funding, about half of which was spent on creating new school places. So there is a significant shortfall in what is needed and the amount of money that is being spent, and that has an ongoing impact.

Then there is the free schools agenda, where the Secretary of State is wedded to his manifesto commitment of 500 new free schools by 2020 from the 2017 base.

I think that there will be just over 850 if that target is reached. We are concerned that those buildings are often not the best. Asbestos surveys are not often done. Local government treasurers tell me that they know of buildings in their own areas that have been sold at well over the odds. It is as though people see a blank cheque when the Government come along with their cheque book for a free school site: the price goes up. That is not good value for money, and it really does need looking at. I do not think that even those most wedded to the free schools principle would want to see money wasted. In my own constituency, where many secondary schools were rebuilt under the academies programme and we have fantastic buildings, it breaks my heart to see new schools opening in inadequate buildings without sports facilities, without proper access, and often with very little in the way of playground facilities. I do not have to time to go into all that, but I recommend to the Department the reports we have done on this, because it is a very big concern.

The biggest concern for me on capital funding is about asbestos. I have a very strong constituency link here. I have a constituent, Lucie Stephens, whose mother was a primary schoolteacher for 30 years and died from mesothelioma—the cancer that comes from exposure to asbestos. She should have been enjoying her retirement now, but instead she is not because she caught this disease from working in a school that had asbestos in it. We looked at this on the Public Accounts Committee. The Department for Education has reported that over 80% of the schools that have now responded to its survey have asbestos. It has estimated that it would cost at least £100 billion to replace the entire school estate—the only way, really, to eradicate asbestos from our school buildings—but in January this year, we found that nearly a quarter of schools had still not provided the information that the Department needs to understand the extent of asbestos in school buildings and how the risks will be managed. Three times now, the Department has had to go back with a different deadline to get those schools responding. The last deadline was 15 February—just over a week ago. Does the Minister have an update on that? We have suggested that it is perhaps time to name and shame those schools. I do not say that lightly, but it is a very serious issue for those concerned.

My big concern is that there is no real incentive for schools to acknowledge their asbestos and get the expensive surveys done without some understanding of where the money will then come from to resolve it. It is not something that will be urgent in every school, and some schools will last a bit longer without it. Clearly, there needs to be a long-term plan and everyone needs to know what it is. There must be a clear plan from central Government with a pot of funding that schools can bid for. As we have heard, reserves and capital funding are very squeezed—squeezed to nothing in many cases, and certainly not enough to pay for asbestos removal or for a new school building. I urge the Secretary of State to be the one who finally upgrades our school buildings so that they are all as good as those in my constituency and the one who does not allow bad free schools to open.

As I said, there are many other issues that many colleagues in all parts of the House will be raising—everything from early years through to higher education—and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

There is a real issue about how we debate school funding, particularly in how we talk about the numbers. We need to make sure that we are actually talking about the same numbers, and then we can move on to a discussion about policy. Unless we get the maths right, we are talking at cross-purposes.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues can see, a number of speakers wish to contribute to this debate and to the debate after it. They are both very well subscribed. I am therefore going to impose a seven-minute time limit. I was able to warn the next speaker that that would happen.

3.7 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank the hon. Members for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) and for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for going to the Backbench Committee together to request this debate.

I want to concentrate my remarks on the Department's expenditure on schools and colleges, into which we are currently conducting an inquiry. The Education Committee wants to support the DFE in making the strongest possible representation to the Treasury as part of the spending review. Last year we launched our inquiry to look at the Department's plans to introduce a national funding formula for schools and the role of targeted support for disadvantaged pupils alongside the influence of the spending review process. Our initial concern was that the three-to-four-year spending review period had far too little in common with the educational experience of young people who start primary school at around five and now participate in some form of education or training until they are 18. School and college funding is inextricably linked to both social justice and productivity, as I will set out in this short contribution.

It is not at all clear that the Department or the Treasury takes a sufficiently strategic approach. The last spending review settlement failed to foresee the cumulative impact of rising pupil numbers and several smaller factors—some of them explicit policy initiatives—that led to the 8% of unmet cost pressures on school budgets over the following year or so. It is also deeply regrettable that the debate around school and college funding has become so polarised. Schools are under pressure, but, as we heard this morning from Andreas Schleicher from the OECD, simply asking for more money will not necessarily lead to better educational outcomes. The debate on education funding needs to move away from one about an abstract concept of equity—the principle underpinning fair funding—towards one of sufficiency, where schools and colleges have the money they need to do the job asked of them.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I am listening with great interest to my right hon. Friend's analysis. Does he agree that this Government have a proud record on education spending and achievement and should be congratulated? However, there are particular areas where we would like to raise issues, as he is doing. In addition to what he is saying about utilising resources, I advise him that in the Borough of Bexley, we saw an increase in the number of education, health and care

plans of 14% between 2017 and 2018, and yet there has been only a 1.9% increase in the high needs block allocation this year.

Robert Halfon: My right hon. Friend is right. As he will hear in my remarks, I agree with much of what he says. We have to praise the Government for the good things that have happened but identify the funding problems.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I commend his Committee's decision to launch the inquiry that he just referenced. Can he ensure that the inquiry takes a brief but particular look at the plight facing Catholic sixth-form colleges? Many do not see themselves as having sufficient funding in the long run, as is the case for many other further education colleges, but they do not have the option of converting to an academy—a route that there are incentives to take—because of their religious character. There is not yet a solution other than to increase funding for all. Will he particularly reference the plight of those 17 English Catholic sixth-form colleges?

Robert Halfon: The inquiry covers schools and colleges, so that issue will form part of it. I note the hon. Gentleman's point and will ensure that we address it in some way or another in our Committee.

We should welcome the introduction of a national formula as the latest step in almost 20 years of reform in education funding. There are serious problems with the way that schools are expected to budget, not least being asked to do so over three years without the information to make reliable forecasts more than a year ahead. I hope the House will forgive me if I take the opportunity to give my strongest support to the plight of further education. I know that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is passionate in her support and is lobbying the Treasury for more FE funding.

FE has for too long been the poor relation between secondary and higher education. By 2020, we will be spending the same amount in real terms to educate and train 16 to 18-year-olds as we were in 1990. I was shocked to discover that that is not an accident of history, but the result of a conscious policy choice of almost a decade ago. FE is a great example of why a national funding formula in and of itself is not a panacea. Without enough money to go around, it does not matter.

The time has come for a completely different approach to how we think of schools and colleges in this country. Rather than the Department for Education being one of many Departments scrapping it out every few years for the meagre rewards of the political cycle, Ministers need to take a leaf from the book of the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England and make a bold bid for a 10-year long-term plan that starts to close the gap between inputs—broadly, in this context, the money—and outcomes at both an individual level, in the form of emerging from school a well-rounded person with prospects, and the wider economic level of having young people ready and able to fulfil the productivity part of the picture. We do not fully recognise the potential value of getting our education system right, and the DFE should make as much as it can of that in

[Robert Halfon]

its negotiations with the Treasury. As a country, we have recognised the long-term necessity of funding the national health service, but without, it seems, the prior necessity of getting school and college funding right as a vital public service.

What would that mean in practice? For a start, we have to move beyond the rhetoric of school cuts versus more money than ever going into schools. That was the starting point of our inquiry and will be an important starting point for our report this year. The truth is that both characterisations are only very partial accounts and keep us talking about inputs rather than outcomes. The relationship between those inputs and outcomes is not simple and causal, as Mr Schleicher told the Committee this morning, but that is emphatically not the same as saying that schools can magically deliver world-beating results at the same time as moving from savings in their non-staff budgets to savings in their staff budgets. When we learn that students in Poland perform at the same level at age 15 as those in the United States, but with per student expenditure that is around 40% lower than in the United States, we need to consider whether simply asking for more money without a plan will get us where we want to be.

We need to take a long, hard look at some flagship policies and be open to questioning whether they are delivering against our stated policy objectives, especially when they engage social justice. Disadvantaged pupils perform a lot worse at school. Just 33% of pupils on free school meals get five good GCSEs, including English and maths, compared with 61% of their better-off peers. The Committee has already expressed its concern that the Government's policy of funded childcare for three and four-year-olds is entrenching disadvantage and preventing the closure of the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers from better-off backgrounds. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), is passionately supportive of our maintained nurseries and is working incredibly hard to persuade the Treasury to guarantee the transition funding that maintained nurseries desperately need.

The consequences of not making the most of the time for which a child is at school last a lifetime, and the pieces are picked up by many other Departments across Government. If schools are increasingly being looked at to prevent some of these problems from occurring, it seems only right that schools receive the resources necessary to do so. I hope that Ministers will use the support in this House for a 10-year, truly long-term plan to secure the best possible deal from the spending review. The logic is inescapable—if the NHS can have a 10-year plan, why cannot education too?

I hope that this will be the start of a different sort of planning for schools and colleges. If education really is to be a ladder of opportunity for everyone, so that people can get the education, skills and training to climb to the top and get the jobs, skills and prosperity that they and our country need, surely there should be proper strategic overview and a long-term plan to ensure that everyone has the tools and support necessary to climb that ladder.

3.16 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. One of the reasons I decided to go into politics was that I saw in our country that inequalities later in life stem from the fact that a child from a poor background is less likely to go on and do well in school than one from a richer background. I will reiterate some of the figures that the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) used about that. Some families in our country are able to spend more on school fees for their children per year than many people earn in salaries. I know that many Members speaking in this debate are motivated by the same thing—they want to improve education across the board, but particularly for children from deprived backgrounds. That is why I want to start with the point made powerfully by the Chairman of the Education Committee—we are lucky to have him—about FE funding, because it is often overlooked in these debates.

We talk about schools and we talk about early years, and I want to talk about those two things as well, but I want to start with FE funding. The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently produced a report saying that further education was the “biggest loser” in the cuts to education. I know that the Secretary of State is very passionate about learning from other countries, such as Germany, but if we are serious about putting our mainstream education and our vocational education on the same footing and valuing both equally, we really need to look again at further education funding.

The principal of the City of Wolverhampton College tells me about the funding pressures he is under, as are the other Black Country colleges in Dudley and Walsall. We have some really fantastic colleges in our region, but we know that their funding has been frozen for far too long. National funding rates for 16 and 17-year-olds have stayed at £4,000 per pupil since 2014; they have not increased in line with inflation. For 18-year-olds, the rate has been frozen at £3,300 per pupil.

I say this because I think the Ministers sitting on the Treasury Bench know about the cost pressures. I served in a Committee on a statutory instrument with the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, where we talked about how we could make provision for colleges that find themselves in a position of insolvency. Well, that tells us everything, doesn't it? We have not had that until now, but the Government have felt they had to make provision for it. I really think we need to think again about the funding for these colleges.

I know that many of my constituents feel they do not want to stay at school, but want to go to college and perhaps study a more vocational course, and Wolverhampton college has some fantastic vocational courses. However, even though there are cost pressures on schools—the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), set those out very eloquently—they are nothing compared with the cost pressures on further education colleges. I am trying to strengthen the arm of Ministers, and I implore them to put more pressure on the Treasury and to make some different decisions about the amount of money going to these colleges.

My second point—I have in a way done this the wrong way around by starting off with the older category—is just to urge the Government for some clarity on the

funding for maintained nursery schools. I have three maintained nursery schools in my constituency, and I am lucky that I have so many. They provide outstanding and good education, and they are a trailblazer for the rest of early years provision in my area. They can help children with special needs in a way that other early years provision is not able to do. I have seen at first hand some of the work they do with some of the most deprived children, and also with some of the children who have the most acute needs in my constituency.

It pains me to hear from those maintained nurseries that, because their teachers do not know what is going to happen beyond 2020, there is a real concern that some of the staff may well leave, as they have mortgages and things in their own lives they have to plan for. I really implore Ministers to hurry up with the assessment that I understand the Government are doing on the value for money of maintained nurseries. I can tell them that, in my own constituency, they are great value for money, and they will hear that from other Members across the House. Maintained nurseries need clarity, and they need it sooner rather than later. I hope that, at some point in the next few weeks or months, we will get that clarity.

My final point is about school funding. I am concerned about the real-terms cuts in school funding. I understand the Chair of the Education Committee when he says that we just argue to and fro, which I do not want to do, about figures and whether schools are really that badly off or not. I was very interested to hear his comparison with the NHS plan. I would certainly welcome a more long-term plan for schools in our country. Some primary schools in my constituency are telling me they are having to lay off teaching assistants and, in some cases, teachers because of pressures on their budgets.

I urge Ministers to look at this again, because unless we can provide a world-class education for our young children, we will not only fail to close the inequalities in our society; we will not thrive as a country because, as has already been said in this debate, this issue relates to productivity, to how we attract investment and to our overall prosperity.

3.23 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this very important estimates debate.

I would like to start where the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who made an excellent speech, finished. Every child in this country deserves a fair chance to get on the ladder of opportunity to the best of his or her abilities. While I warmly welcome the record funding that is going into education in this country at the moment, the problem is that, in some areas on the ground in our constituencies, it does not feel like that. I want to concentrate on those areas, particularly the funding of schools and further education colleges.

I welcome this debate and the increase in the departmental expenditure limit, up from £66.4 billion to £77.9 billion, although most of the increase is to cover the write-off of student loans. I also welcome the introduction of the new funding formula's money for schools in April 2018, which should provide £4,800 per secondary pupil and £3,500 per primary pupil. The problem, as my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench

know, is that the local authority distributes this money, which means that quite a number of schools in my constituency do not even receive that amount.

I am grateful to follow my friend the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who chairs the Public Accounts Committee, on which I serve as deputy Chair. Secondary schools in her constituency—I do not mean this in any personal or political way; her constituency just happens to be at the top of the league—receive on average £7,840 per pupil, which is a 64% increase on schools in my constituency. I ask my colleagues on the Front Bench whether that is really fair. In addition to that 64% increase, quite a lot of the schools in her constituency get the pupil premium money. One wonders, given the funding streams in this country, whether there is an element of double counting.

Of course school costs will be higher in a central London constituency, but even in Gloucestershire, costs such as the national teachers' pay award increase in 2018, the apprenticeship levy imposition, additional HR costs, increased pension costs, higher levels of special needs and higher rural bus costs, all of which are imposed by Government, amount to about 6%. Therefore, if the Government increase their cash amount this year by 1%, it is effectively a 5% budget cut, which has to be met by efficiencies. Things have been pared down over a number of years.

Mr Will Morgan, the excellent headteacher of the excellent Cotswold School in Bourton-on-the-Water, recently wrote to me to say:

"Over recent years we have made many savings—class sizes, teacher contact time, TA support, service costs, reducing leadership, etc. Despite this, if finances continue as they are and we do nothing, we will be in deficit as a school at some point in the 2021-22 academic year.

One of our strategies to try to alleviate this 'cliff edge' is to ask parents to donate—for many, including myself, this goes against what we should be doing".

That is what is happening on the ground. We need to fund our schools at a level at which they can operate properly.

When I have discussed this with various Schools Ministers in recent years, they have always told me that their Department was going to do some work on what it really costs to run a secondary school and a primary school. There are certainly inescapable costs: the teachers have to be paid, the buildings have to be maintained and kept warm, and there has to be an administration function. Let us find out what it really costs and ensure that no school anywhere in the country goes below that level. As others have said before, if we go below that level, schools have to make cuts, either in teachers or in curriculum subjects.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his significant speech, and I concur with the point he has just made. In the London Borough of Lewisham, 71 of 73 schools are facing cuts, and are losing £8.8 million between 2015 and 2020.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. Nobody wants to see any schools having to make cuts; they want to see every school trying to attain outstanding Ofsted reports, to be able to educate all their children and pupils to the best possible standard according to their abilities.

[*Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

I say to my colleagues on the Front Bench that I believe the maxim should be that similar schools with similar demographics, wherever they are in the UK, should receive similar funding. Unfortunately, I was unable to find an example in the time available. I ask my hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench how they intend to address that problem, and bring to their attention two other problems in the primary and secondary sectors. Gloucestershire is a well-run local authority. At the moment, it does not run a deficit in its education funding, but a number of local education authorities do. However, we have two serious emerging problems in Gloucestershire, which I hope my hon. Friends on the Front Bench will listen to seriously.

The first relates to the higher needs block. In Gloucestershire, the higher needs block has increased by 40% over three years. We were incredibly grateful when the Minister announced an extra £1.3 million over two years. That will be helpful over the next two or three years, but we have to address the structural problem. We have to work out why it is that in Gloucestershire schools—I believe Gloucestershire is not alone—there is a very large increase in special needs. I am sure it is all to do with the education and healthcare plans. How they are granted and funded, in particular for out-of-county placements, place a very high burden on the budget.

The second point I would like to bring to the attention of my hon. Friends is the significant increase in the number of exclusions in some schools, so that they do not have to bear the costs and difficulty of dealing with difficult pupils. It does seem—I ask my hon. Friends to do some work on this—that certain schools have consistently higher exclusions than others. That must be to do with a school's policy, rather than a policy that suits the individual pupil. That cannot be right. I would like to know what happens to those excluded pupils. Some return to school and that is good. Some are withdrawn from the register entirely and may be home educated, where they receive pretty scant attention from the state. Some will be educated excellently at home, but I suspect some will receive little education at home. Some will be looked after by social services. Sadly, some will end up in the criminal justice system. That cannot be right.

Finally, in the last minute available to me, I would like to talk about further education. The principal of Cirencester College, the only college to trial T-levels in Gloucestershire at the moment, contacted me the other day to say that rather than the £4,800 per pupil it would get in the national funding formula, he is receiving between £3,600 and £4,000 per pupil. That amount has been constant for five years, despite increased costs. He says he has had to reduce subjects, teachers and mental health services, and that the funding is half of what a university student receives. He says his funding for doing the same job should, in all fairness, be the same as if his pupils were receiving A-level education in sixth form. He has higher costs in a rural area and says rurality should be one of the factors in the formula. That would help schools in rural areas like his.

3.32 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I would like to put on the record my thanks to the Backbench Business

Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), who leads the Public Accounts Committee so well, and the National Audit Office. It is fair to say that I rely heavily on the reports the NAO produces and I think it does a wonderful job. I would also like to give a shout out to Botley Primary School—I am a governor—because it got the call from Ofsted yesterday and is in the thick of it. Given that the first thing I am going to talk about is Ofsted, it would be fair to wish the school good luck today. I know they will do us all very proud.

As governors, we focus heavily on school funding. In my local area, a school recently wrote to parents to ask for pencils and pens because it cannot afford them. Another school—I will not mention which one—is consulting, quietly and behind the scenes, on going down to a four-day week, because it cannot afford to keep its teachers at full-time level; if it did, it would have to start going into severe deficits. In the context of the estimates, what we want to know is this: if there are funding pressures, are they affecting outcomes? In the end, that is what it is about. Are they affecting outcomes? Are they driving value for money or not? What are the outcomes of the policy decisions themselves? Today is about not party political speeches, but looking at the evidence in front of us.

The Public Accounts Committee has been looking at a whole host of issues, including school accountability and governance. When, with the Department for Education, governors and parents, we have explored where the buck stops on school accountability, the picture is, unfortunately, quite muddled. No one can tell us empirically where the buck is meant to stop. The Department for Education says that it is up to the multi-academy trusts or local authorities, who say that it is down to the governors, who rely very heavily on Ofsted to be able to say whether or not these funding pressures are leading to lower or higher outcomes. In fact, I think Amanda Spielman slightly overstepped her initial remit—but quite rightly—in saying that there are definitely outcome failures in the FE sector as a result of the financial pressures that many Members have mentioned today. She said that we do not empirically know whether that is happening in schools or not, but our argument is that if we had the proper data, we could probably get a better idea of what is going on.

This is at a time when Ofsted's own budget is under pressure. Its remit has expanded significantly since 2000, with successive Governments of all colours having asked it to do more and more. As well as schools, its remit now covers other sectors including children's social care, early years and childcare, further education and skills providers. Meanwhile, its budget has had a decrease—a cut—of 40%. I will go on to talk about more things that I wish Ofsted would do, but the better question may be: what is our mechanism for school improvement and accountability? Is Ofsted the right provider to be able to do this? I know that the Department is consulting on the new Ofsted inspection framework, which we absolutely welcome, but as part of that, we need to carefully consider whether introducing even more into Ofsted's budget is the right thing to do or whether it is time to have another body altogether.

Passing the buck is more than just a financial matter and more than just about data and numbers; it is also a matter for the community and its parents. One of the

more striking sessions in the Public Accounts Committee was when we had campaigners from Whitehaven Academy, whose community shouted from the rooftops about the financial mismanagement and irregularities that were happening in that school. One of the questions that we asked was, “What does it take to get these things looked at?” It took two MPs of different parties, one of whom was forcibly removed from the premises when they visited the school. There was a “Panorama” investigation and we still do not fully know the outcome of what has happened in Whitehaven. This continues to drag on and my Twitter feed is full of parents who are shouting yet again from the rooftops, “Where does the buck stop?”

Meanwhile, we have the Durand Academy, whose school was transferred to the Dunraven Educational Trust. The first canaries in this case were back in 2014. The Public Accounts Committee had a hearing on this issue in January 2015 and in it identified a

“lack of clarity about who ultimately owned assets”,

governance arrangements that were “overly complex and opaque”, a

“lack of effective timely intervention by the”

Department for Education and the FSA, and that the

“lack of an appropriate fit and proper persons test”,

had allowed directors to run the trust who developed “inappropriate business interests”. How on earth did it take until August 2018 for the funding to finally be cut? It is extraordinary.

Our argument is that this is partly because we now have a muddled twin-track system of schooling, where there are local authority-maintained schools of the older style with this new academies system. It has really been only this year—the first time was last year, and now this year—that we have seen the accounts, so that we can properly assess how this system is working alongside the other. We know, for example, that it takes a certain amount of money to convert schools into academies. In fact, in 2017-18 the Department for Education spent £59 million on conversion and re-brokering, but what about the extra costs to local authorities in doing that? What about the hollowing out of local authorities’ ability to support maintained schools? That was an area that the Public Accounts Committee was concerned about. It is an example of cost-shunting by removing an aspect of the system in one part of schools. As far as kids are concerned, they do not care whether they are in academies, free schools or maintained schools.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In my constituency, schools are now almost completely responsible for funding support services. Currently, local schools are covering a shortfall of £2.3 million for higher needs schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that this represents a total failure of the Government to invest in the future of our children?

Layla Moran: Indeed, we have heard about the higher needs block; that is yet another area where there is cost-shunting.

On the twin-track system, what we need to do is look beyond: is one system better than the other? Actually, we have a lot to learn from the sorts of innovations that we are seeing in schools, but I am not convinced from the evidence we have seen in the Public Accounts Committee that we have a handle on the data. In our recommendations to the Department we have asked it to look at, for

example, different types of multi-academy trusts—is there a difference between those that are locally based and those that are spread out or between the rural and the urban? Is there a north-south divide when it comes to academy trusts? What can we learn from the data? At the moment, when the accounts are produced, we do not have that data.

I very much echo what the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) was saying earlier. I firmly believe that this is not just a question of more money for schools. More money is welcome to get them working as they hope to now, but the issue is also about driving efficiency and spreading best practice. Without the data, how will we know what is working best?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I gently remind colleagues that if they are going to intervene, it is important that they should have been in the Chamber for the whole speech and a little bit of the debate as well.

3.41 pm

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Some years before I came to this place, I chaired something called the Grant Maintained Schools Advisory Committee. For many years, we fought for a national funding formula. We failed because the civil servants kept saying that there would always be winners and losers—well, there are winners and losers now.

When the Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), came up with a proposed national funding formula a few years ago, I was really excited because I thought that we were going to crack the nut. When he came up with the proposal, most of my schools were going to be winners; now, they are all—or nearly all—losers. We are not doing well in my area. I am really disappointed that the national funding formula really has not benefited my area at all. There are two local authorities: a unitary one in Derby city, and Derbyshire County Council. There is very little difference between the two.

Schools are already benefiting from more money: many schools that have been historically underfunded will attract up to 6% more per pupil compared with 2017-18. The Minister for School Standards said on 24 July last year:

“The formula allocates every local authority more money for every pupil, in every school, in both 2018-19 and 2019-20, compared to their 2017-18 baselines.”—[*Official Report*, 24 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 67WS.]

As my right hon. Friend stated, more money than ever before is going to our schools. School funding is at a record high. The core schools budget has increased to £42.4 billion this academic year and is set to rise to £43.5 billion in 2019-20, and that follows the additional £1.3 billion of funding over and above what was promised in the last spending review.

That all sounds really good, and it is good news for Mid Derbyshire in terms of the school block allocation, which has seen a 2.9% increase since 2013. But that is against a backdrop of an average 4.6% increase in the east midlands region; across the UK, there has been a 4.8% increase. Although, the increase is positive, it is disappointing that the increase in Mid Derbyshire is not

[Mrs Pauline Latham]

as significant as in the region as a whole and in England. The lowest allocation for a primary school in my area is £3,300 per pupil; the highest is £5,351. The schools are not markedly different. They do not have a particularly different intake, do not attract a huge pupil premium or need huge special needs provision. I cannot understand why there is such a disparity. The disparity in secondary education is not so marked: the lowest allocation is £4,629 and the highest £4,801.

Since 2013, 22 out of 29 of my primary schools have seen a decrease in funding. Little Eaton Primary School, which is near where I live, has lost £37 per pupil. Morley Primary School has lost £324. Ashbrook Infant and Nursery School has lost £162. Ashbrook Junior School has lost £14. Duffield Meadows Primary School has lost £25. Belper Long Row Primary School has lost £149. Pottery Primary School has lost £7, which is not so bad. Milford Community Primary School has lost £925. Herbert Strutt Primary School has lost £180. Breadsall Church of England VC Primary School has lost £245. St Andrew's Church of England Primary in Stanley has lost £477. St Elizabeth's Catholic Primary School has lost £16. William Gilbert Endowed Church of England Primary School has lost £45. Redhill Primary School has lost £105. Portway Infant School has lost £70, and the junior school has lost £146. Asterdale Primary School has lost £648. Springfield Primary School has lost £531. St Werburgh's Church of England VA Primary School has lost £179. Lawn Primary School has lost £3, which is also not too bad. Borrow Wood Primary School has lost £185. The only secondary school to lose funding is Allestree Woodlands School, which, although it is not in a very different catchment area from the other three secondary schools, has lost £87 per pupil. The others have gained by £50-plus.

Little Eaton Primary School—which, as I have said, is near where I live—is receiving £3,542 per pupil, while in 2013 it was receiving £3,579 and in 2015 the figure rose to £3,730, its highest point, but it has still lost money. I do not understand why there are such disparities in funding, given the national funding formula, given that these are very similar schools with very similar catchment areas and very similar results, with no huge number of pupils with special needs—there are some, but it is a fairly average number—and without a huge amount of deprivation.

I urge the Secretary of State and his Ministers to think again. I do not like being negative, because the Government have done some amazing things for education and I applaud them for everything that they have done, but in this instance, in my constituency, I think that they have gone wrong.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. There are still a number of Members who wish to speak, so after the next speaker I will reduce the limit to six minutes.

3.47 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on a very evidence-based, thought-provoking and

powerful speech. The tone of today's debate has, in fact, been sombre and evidence-based. There is a strong message for Ministers: this is the reality of cuts. We can bandy numbers and arguments across the Dispatch Box all we like, but this is the reality that schools are facing. There are facts, there are figures and there are numbers, and they represent the reality of people's lives and the reality of the cuts in our constituencies.

The debate is timely for me, because a number of parents have come to my surgeries and expressed great concern about school cuts, and a large number of headteachers and governors have come to me in groups to tell me about the distress that they feel because they cannot continue to deliver the standard of education that they have been used to delivering, and that our children need.

I commend the primary schools in Redcar and Cleveland, which are among the best in the country. I particularly congratulate St Bede's Catholic Primary School in Marske—and all the parents, staff and children on being named by *The Times* as the best state primary school in the country. That is a phenomenal achievement, but all the schools in my area, particularly the primaries, are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver the standard that children need against a backdrop of cuts. According to the School Cuts website, Redcar and Cleveland's budget will have been reduced by £4.3 million in real terms between 2015 and 2020. That is a per-pupil loss of £226.

I hear grumbling about the statistics from the Government Front Bench. Let me set out the reality of what this means to our schools. Teachers and heads in my constituency are going above and beyond to try to ensure that the children are not affected by the scale of the cuts. It epitomises the quality, care and passion of our staff that they are willing to do these things to try to make sure the cuts are absorbed and the children are not affected. In one school a member of staff has suggested that staff should be regraded for one day a week—graded down from their actual worth, value and achievement—to make savings in staffing costs. Two staff members who are eligible to apply to go through the pay threshold suggested they would not apply to do so because they did not want the school budget to increase.

Support staff have had their hours cut by an average of five hours per week. That might not sound like a huge cut, but these support staff have on average contracts of only 15 hours a week so they are losing a third of their week's pay. Local churches have been donating money from their charities to help fund curriculum budgets—not little extras but curriculum budgets, an area in which schools have had to make large cuts.

Teachers tell us about the voluntary help they receive in the classroom—people giving up their time free of charge. Without that voluntary work they would not be able to deliver the best teaching practice and would therefore be failing our children. We are reliant on the voluntary sector; I do not think this is what David Cameron's big society was supposed to be doing—replacing and enabling the fundamental education of our children in schools.

Governors have told me they are concerned that next year things will be even worse as they will have to find extra resources to fund additional pension payments and in all likelihood that will lead to reductions in

teaching staff. I was also struck to the core as I was leaving one of the meetings when I was told that one of the headteachers in my area had to make a member of the cleaning staff redundant to meet the budget that year, but was very upset about it and realised that this just was not practical, safe and hygienic, and he is now paying that member of the cleaning staff from his own salary. That is a ridiculous situation for us to be in in this country, and it is clear that the cuts are to the bone now and schools cannot continue to provide the kind of service they want to offer.

I also want to briefly talk in the time allocated to me about SEND—special educational needs and disability—education as there has been a huge increase in demand for that in my local area and there is real and deep concern. Nationally, demand for services for children and young people with SEND has increased by 35% in just the last four years; that is a huge increase but there has not been the budget to cover it. We are seeing now the reality of that in our constituencies, affecting our children. A recent Local Government Association survey of local authorities found that councils fund support for nearly 320,000 children with complex needs and disabilities but are facing a funding gap of almost £500 million. That gap has been plugged by taking funding from elsewhere in schools, as we have heard, and by drawing down reserves.

The National Association of Head Teachers has published the results of a survey on SEND showing that only 2% of respondents said the top-up funding they received was sufficient to meet individual education, health and care plan statements, while 94% of respondents were finding it harder to resource the support required to meet the needs of pupils with SEND, and 73% said it was harder to resource support for pupils with SEND due to cuts to mainstream funding. This is the reality of what we are seeing: vulnerable children who need the most help and support to enable them to flourish and fulfil their potential are those most let down by these cuts. That is balancing the books on the backs of the children who need the most help and support to flourish.

I also want to briefly mention children's services because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) mentioned, wider cuts are having a knock-on effect as well. Pressure is building right across education and children's services. In Redcar and Cleveland our children's services have a £4.2 million overspend. The number of looked-after children is almost double what it was five years ago, and that is alongside the cuts of £90 million that Redcar and Cleveland has seen to its budget, which means it now has a £4.2 million overspend.

Ofsted's 2017-18 annual report commented on a sharp increase in recent years in demand for assessments to be carried out, as well as a growing number of refusals by local authorities to do so, and raised concerns about increasing numbers of children awaiting provision despite having a plan in place. In 2018, 2,000 children with a statement were awaiting provision, almost three times more than in 2010.

The tone of today's debate has been positive, constructive and thoughtful. We all want the same end; we all want our children to have the best start in life, to flourish and to have everything they need from their years in school, but the reality is this cannot happen without funding and the reality is that the funding formulas we have are

not working. The support is not there; our schools are being cut to the bone and I urge the Government to do more to make sure every child can fulfil their potential.

3.54 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), on bringing forward this report. It is good that we have recently had more debating time on things to do with children in schools. We have another debate on schools funding on Monday, and we recently spoke about maintained nursery education and the false economy of not continuing to fund it sustainably. Yesterday, we had the announcement on sex and relationship education. All these things add to the pressures and costs on schools, and I am afraid that the budgets for schools just do not go up commensurately to make them possible. We have had an intelligent debate so far. It has concentrated almost exclusively on schools, but it is a little-known fact that children's social care is an important part of the Department for Education, which comes within the scope of today's debate, so I want to raise a few issues on this.

Meg Hillier: One of the challenges is that, while this is a policy responsibility for the Department for Education, the funding goes through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and directly to local authorities. This is one of the instances in which the Government need to work together and not succumb to cost-shunting, where cuts in one area can have an impact on children's achievement elsewhere.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and it is of course the local authorities that get the blame for not delivering the goods, even though we have not been giving them the money to do so in certain cases. There are also huge differentials in the way in which those local authorities use their money.

On children's social care, I would like to hear more about sufficiency funding, which the Chair of the Education Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), mentioned, and also about a 10-year plan. Children's most important years are the ones before they go to school—those years will shape their careers in school and beyond more than anything else—so, for goodness' sake, if we cannot have a 10-year plan for the social care needs of our children as they grow up, what can we have one for?

I am not going to have time to talk about schools today—I shall have to reserve those comments for the debate on Monday—but I just want to make the point that all the ongoing cost pressures on schools are going to be compounded by the recent directive from the Department for Education that was sent to schools on 6 February recommending a 2% pay rise for teachers this year. That is fine, but the Department's report stated that

“a pay increase for teachers of 2%, in line with forecast inflation, is affordable within the overall funding available to schools for 2019 to 2020, without placing further pressure on school budgets.”

I am afraid that that is just not the case. School budgets are under huge pressure, certainly in my constituency and elsewhere in West Sussex, where we have been at the bottom of the pile for funding for many years.

[Tim Loughton]

The cumulative effect of that underfunding means that there is no fat left to cut. All the savings have been made, so even a 2% increase in teachers' pay, if it is to be paid for by the schools, will have enormous impacts on those school budgets' ability to provide all the other services, which I will go into in detail in the debate on Monday.

On children's services, a report commissioned by Action for Children, the National Children's Bureau, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Children's Society and Barnardo's has come out today, and it confirms what we all know about the huge shortfall in funding for children's social care. That shortfall was also identified in the work that the all-party parliamentary group on children did in the report "Storing Up Trouble" that we produced last year. It is estimated that there will be a £3 billion funding gap by 2025. One of the alarming observations in today's report is that spending on early intervention services for children and young people fell from £3.7 billion to £1.9 billion between 2010-11 and 2017-18. That is a 49% decrease in spending on early intervention. At the same time, local authority spending on late intervention services for children and young people has risen from £5.9 billion to £6.7 billion—a 12% increase.

This is not rocket science. If we do not spend early to prevent the problems from happening to these children, we will pay for it later. We will pay for it socially—most importantly—and also financially. It is such a false economy not to do more in those early years around perinatal mental health, around child neglect and around making children ready for school, for growing up and for society generally. Some of the biggest falls in spending have been in some of the most deprived authorities in the country, where the impact can be greater because the other support services, including family support services, are not available to help those children.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I have been in this House for eight and a half years. When I retired as deputy leader of Gateshead Council, it had an annual revenue account of £310 million, but now, eight and a half years later, it is down to £200 million despite the huge growth needs built into the system in Gateshead.

Tim Loughton: Well, I have been here for 22 years, and I have also seen a thing or two.

When I was a Minister at the Department for Education, we came up with the early intervention budget because it was the right thing to do on so many fronts. It alarms me that early intervention is seen as a luxury add-on rather than an essential part of everything that we should be doing for our children, and we should be planning for it over the long term. That is why, for all the reasons I have set out, I am pleased to see—I know that the Minister for Children supports this work—the inter-ministerial working party led by the Leader of the House trying to co-ordinate early years activities across Government.

Turning to schools, the big figures that we talk about in these reports—the big percentage increases—are meaningless until we translate them into their impact on the frontline. I have spent the past couple of years getting all the heads from all the schools in my constituency

and all the chairs of governors together to ask them about the impact of funding challenges on their schools. I asked not what might happen, but what is happening now. I wrote a seven-page letter to the Secretary of State for Education with the findings from all those schools, which included impacts as a result of not replacing staff or replacing them with less expensive and therefore less qualified staff, of having to remove things from the curriculum, and of doing away with out-of-school visits. Alarmingly, counselling services have also been reduced—almost to zero in some cases—at a time when we all know the effect of mental health stresses on the younger generation. The Government have recognised that, and work is ongoing, but if people are not on hand in schools to help with the stresses and strains that lead to mental health problems, that will just store up expensive problems, both financially and socially, for children in those schools.

We have been generous and have planned for the long term in the national health service, and it is essential not to neglect early long-term planning in a preventive way for our babies, toddlers, children and young people. It is a complete false economy not to be doing that. While I appreciate the additional money that the Government have been putting in, I am afraid that the estimates that we are looking at today, when they are factored down to the impact that they will have in authorities such as mine in West Sussex, which has had severe underfunding for so many years, will have a detrimental effect on the life chances of our children. Frankly, we have to do better, or we will be picking up a much more expensive and complicated bill further down the line.

4.3 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I am proud to have supported the request for today's debate that was co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran).

A report published last week by the Resolution Foundation predicted that the proportion of children in relative poverty could hit 37% by 2023. Low pay and cuts to welfare have hit and will continue to hit disadvantaged families the hardest, and I know all about that as a former headteacher of a school with a Sure Start centre on site. Not only does poverty affect a child's experiences, but it is significant in determining their life chances. In education, the attainment gap between the most disadvantaged children and their peers is visible by the age of five, and it continues on throughout their childhood, potentially leading to poorer qualifications and difficulties in employment later in life.

As stated in the Education Committee's report on life chances, the Government's strategy on early years lacks direction. If the number of children in poverty is rising, the early years workforce needs to be equipped with the support and resources to be the first line of defence in improving children's life chances and to work on early intervention, as mentioned by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). What is the Department doing to anticipate those challenges, rather than responding in the midst of a crisis when it is much harder and more costly to fix? In addition, funding pressures on local authorities and services have led to reduced support for children and families. Too often, schools take on the burden of providing that support.

As a former teacher and headteacher, I understand their drive to do whatever they can to help their pupils, but I also see the pressure that schools and teachers are already under from heavy workloads and funding cuts. Some 95% of schools in my Colne Valley constituency are facing a shortfall compared with funding levels in 2015-16, and 67% of schools in my constituency have lost over £150 per pupil—seven are losing over £400 per pupil. Just think what could be done for each individual child with that money.

My constituency has had a cumulative shortfall of over £5.5 million since 2015, while pupil numbers have risen by more than 800. At my last meeting with Colne Valley headteachers, they told me that the situation has led to cuts in staffing, resources and provision overall. They also talked about the difficulties in SEND provision due to a lack of child and adolescent mental health services and a lack of funding for the delivery of education, health and care plans.

Those headteachers said that their teachers are suffering from stress due to not being able to provide children with the support that their experience and professional awareness tell them is necessary. Let us listen to the professionals. Mounting workloads, rising class sizes and an ever-growing list of responsibilities have pushed classroom teachers to work a 60-hour week. All of that hard work is rewarded by stagnating wages.

It is therefore no surprise that teachers young and old, the recently qualified and those with years of experience, are leaving the profession. The number of teachers leaving exceeded the number joining in 2017, which shows just how serious this crisis is. I welcome the Government's intentions in their recruitment and retention strategy, but committing £130 million for the delivery of the early career framework in 2021, alongside other smaller measures, is not enough to tackle the root causes that are draining morale in the profession.

If the starting pay for teachers remains low compared with other graduate professions, dedicated and passionate potential trainees may choose other careers. If qualified teachers do not have the resources to fully deliver lesson plans, or to offer extra support to those who need it, they are still going to experience frustration. If responsibilities for safeguarding and mental health, and so on, continue to be piled on to teachers, their workloads will not go down. What consideration are the Government giving to these wider, more fundamental issues in the education system that, if addressed, could deliver long-term benefits for both recruitment and retention?

All of us in this House want the best for the children in our schools. We want them to experience the joy of learning, to develop the skills to succeed in life as well as employment and, ultimately, to live a fulfilled and productive life. But if the Department does not prepare for rising levels of need or for rising numbers, if it does not address the root causes of stress and pressure for teachers, and if it does not give schools the tools to support both learners and educators, we will not be able to achieve those goals.

Unless education is fully funded, I can see children's rights to a free education and to different forms of education being eroded, and I urge the Department to reflect on today's debate and to use it as an opportunity to take radical action.

4.8 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), who speaks with a huge amount of authority on this issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) on securing this debate, and it was a pleasure to support her application.

I should declare an interest, albeit not a pecuniary interest. My wife is a primary schoolteacher, and as comfy as the sofa is, I prefer the bed. I also have a seven-year-old in a local primary school and a young daughter who will start primary school next year, so I suppose that I have a vested interest.

Like many of my constituents, as a parent I completely understand the importance of education. When I speak to constituents, education is often their second largest priority—second only to our NHS. As a Conservative, I completely support equality of opportunity, which stems from education. Education is at the very heart of it. To that end, I am delighted that 1.9 million more children than in 2010 are being taught in good and outstanding schools—this has increased from 66% to 84%.

This is a debate in anticipation of the Government's spending review, and although it is not only about money, money is inevitably an important factor. Let me start with the bits that I very much support and welcome. I welcome the introduction of the national funding formula, which is supported by a not insignificant £1.3 billion across 2018-19 and 2019-20. I welcome the fact that the Government protected the schools budget up to 2016, when other Departments faced cuts in the early coalition years. I welcome the fact that the core school funding budget will rise from £41 billion in 2017-18 to £42 billion this year and £43.5 billion in 2019-20.

One of the most enjoyable parts of being an MP is attending assemblies, which I do regularly on Friday mornings, and listening to not only teachers and headteachers but parents, governors and, indeed, pupils, to hear what they think and how they talk about our role here and how it impacts on them. I suppose this is a good juncture to pay tribute to all the teachers and the amazing schools we have in Colchester. Having met those teachers, headteachers, governors and parents, I find that we are asking our schools to do more than ever before and that is putting unbelievable pressure on teachers—I see that at home, but I also understand it from having spoken to teachers from across the schools in the constituency.

Schools are facing unprecedented cost pressures, and I wish to touch on a few of them because the context of the pressures schools are under is important when we talk about additional funding in education budgets. These cost pressures include providing support and intervention for children with specific learning difficulties; mental health issues; employer pension contributions; the national living wage; academies and multi-academy trusts potentially having less bargaining power than local authorities used to in terms of economies of scale; the costs that came with the general data protection rule; the rising cost of utilities; the apprenticeship levy; the growing cost of appeals; the costs of changing to multi-academy trusts; staff development; staff recruitment; and of course the teachers' pay award. I have just touched on a few of the many rising cost pressures on schools.

[Will Quince]

In the short time available, I wish to touch on further education, which I genuinely believe is verging on crisis. For 16 and 17-year-olds, funding has been frozen at £4,000 per student since 2013, and for 18-year-olds, it has been frozen at £3,300 since 2014. As I just mentioned, colleges and sixth forms are not immune to all those different cost rises and more, and the Government have imposed a range of new requirements. Costs have risen sharply and the budget has not risen to reflect that. That is not good for students; it is damaging our international competitiveness; and it harms social mobility.

The Secretary of State is no longer in his place, but the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is. They will know, because I have lobbied them both on this issue on numerous occasions, that I believe that schools have already maximised the efficiency savings that were available to them. A toolkit was helpfully provided by the Department, and schools have used it and gone even further. I genuinely believe that there is no more fat left to trim, and I do not want our headteachers focusing on how they can further squeeze their budgets; I want them focusing on educational attainment and improving outcomes for students in all our schools.

So I do have some asks. I know the Minister has heard them before, but I do not apologise for repeating them. We do need an increase in the revenue budget and in the high-needs budget. The rate for 16 to 19-year-old pupils must increase. The national funding formula needs to be rolled out and implemented in full as soon as possible. Funding settlements should be for a minimum of three years. We cannot expect schools to produce three-year budgets but not give them that certainty and consistency in their funding. We have to increase the capital budget for our schools.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Does my hon. Friend think it odd that the NHS has a budget for 10 years, local government has a budget for three years and yet schools have a budget for only one year?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He reads my mind, because I was just about to say that we need a long-term plan for education and schools, in the same way that we have one for our NHS. This is absolutely the right thing to do, because teachers and headteachers need that certainty and consistency. We also need to ensure that mental and physical health services are adequately resourced.

I genuinely believe that we are on the precipice. The vast majority of any school budget—anywhere between 80% and 90%—is spent on people. They are the asset in our education system. If there is no more fat to trim, the only place left to go is to reduce staff, and that will have a detrimental impact on pupils' attainment and, indeed, outcomes across the board. There are already schools in Colchester that are letting support staff go and not filling vacancies. My fear is that if that continues, we will start to see a decline in results.

I wholeheartedly believe that education is at the heart of equality of opportunity. I believe in social mobility, and education is its key enabler. Education is an investment in our people. I will continue to lobby for additional funding for education and ask that the education budget is increased in all the areas I have mentioned ahead of the next spending review.

4.15 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince).

The West of England combined authority, which includes my Bristol South constituency, is one of the areas currently producing a local industrial strategy in a bid to help to boost productivity. Early analysis of the evidence base for the strategy has shown gaps in educational and training provision compared with future business needs and that the job market does not work well for all residents, particularly those with low or no formal qualifications. The attainment gap is larger in the west of England than nationally, with 16 to 17-year-olds more likely not to be in education, employment or training, and there is significant inequality across the geographical area. These inequalities in education need to be addressed to improve future productivity. The local industrial strategy will be successful only if it is inclusive and supports opportunities, but how will that be achieved? I will confine my remarks to the policy areas that I think are critical to reducing inequality and improving social mobility: early years, further education and apprenticeships.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) gave a good summary of the need to support early years education. The evidence base is strongly in favour of high-quality education between birth and the age of five, as has been well established for a number of years. I am a former governor of one of Bristol's many nursery school and children's centre settings that has education, not social work or childcare, as its core purpose. As a former member of the Public Accounts Committee, I remember when we looked into the entitlement to free early years education. We saw strong evidence for the sector but recognised that it was not stable and that local authorities needed more support. Local authorities and, indeed, the Department for Education had no real mechanism for identifying what was happening in the sector or whether it was being managed well.

The Education Committee and the Treasury Committee are looking into the provision of the additional childcare element, but we need somehow to get the Government to look across Departments and join up the policy objectives and the money so that we can be clear about what is wanted from the sector. I recently met some of my local headteachers, some of whom have been teaching for 30 years, and they have never seen so much of their workload given over to picking up the crises families are going through. The question for the Department is what is its early years policy objective and how is it going to get to grips with it and with the local government cuts that are having such an effect, particularly on the maintained sector.

Several colleagues have spoken about further education, which is absolutely the other key driver of social mobility. It offers everyone a second chance and the opportunity of lifelong learning that the economy and individuals need. The funding cuts to post-16 education have been really quite severe, particularly since 2010. FE funding has been the hardest hit since that peak, resulting in closures, job losses and, critically, cuts to the student numbers that are needed so much. The post-16 transition time is vital. We really need to get to the point where we consider that point as important as the transition into school and the transition from primary into secondary

education. The cuts to further education are a barrier to that happening, so I absolutely support the call to increase the funding rates for 16 to 18-year-olds.

I support the letter of the chief inspector of schools to the Public Accounts Committee in which she, too, supported the increase in the base and a welcome look at the accountability across the different bodies that are involved in further education to try to improve their performance, to improve what they are trying to do and to share information.

The Public Accounts Committee also looked at the sustainability of the sector. The area reviews are coming to an end, and I do hope that the Committee will look again at what is happening in this sector. We have seen some good leadership in this sector with regard to financial sustainability, but, again, I ask the question: what does the Department want to achieve for its money in further education? I worry about whether the sector has been made financially sustainable and what on earth we are left with in terms of the teaching in some of those settings to help on that productivity and skills gap, which is so crucial.

When the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) was a Minister, he came to Bristol South, looking at the importance of a good further education provider in a constituency such as mine, which has many similarities to Harlow in terms of supporting young people into those better opportunities.

I support part of what the Government are trying to do with apprenticeships, because of the post-16 situation in my constituency. Since becoming an MP, I have championed apprenticeships as a route, or a ladder, to greater opportunities. I am about to hold my third apprenticeships and jobs fair on Thursday. This year, I have managed to work with the council and the Department for Work and Pensions to cohere the work that is being done in my constituency around the people of Bristol South. I hope that the fair is again a great success. Again, we are not seeing the apprenticeship policy really doing what it needs to do to improve life chances.

In conclusion, we have a good overview on this matter. Again, I thank the National Audit Office for its briefing—I went to one this morning. We know what the Department is spending its money on, but we are not really clear about its objectives and about how it is achieving better outcomes for young people. We are also clear that we have a skills gap, a productivity problem and a population who are desperate to fill those jobs, which can give them better life chances. The Department's vision is to prioritise support particularly for disadvantaged people in disadvantaged areas, but, I am afraid, it is not working in my constituency. I am keen to work with the Government to make sure that it improves.

4.21 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I welcome today's debate. Already, we have heard a whole range of broad themes around education, including, importantly, how we can support and improve the life chances of our young people. It is pretty obvious that the Department has a wide range of responsibilities to secure the delivery of high quality education that meets the needs of our young people and our country. It is right that, over the years, we have seen a focus on rigour in the system and, importantly, that we have ensured that our children and

young people are supported and that they get the right kind of care, skill and support to enhance their opportunities and their life chances.

I welcome the fact that, since 2010, there are now 1.9 million more pupils being taught in schools that are rated "good" or "outstanding" by Ofsted. That represents about 86% of all pupils. The fact is, however, no Government, and no Government policy on education, can ever stand still. As we have already heard from friends and colleagues—hon. and right hon. Members—as part of the comprehensive spending review it is important that the Government consider how schools, education providers and local authorities are funded for the services that they provide.

We have also heard about care today—care for young people. Care is provided not just by our schools, but through local authorities. It is a fact that many of our local authorities are strapped for cash and challenged with many other pressures. Education stands at the foundations of our country, and it is, of course, where our next generation comes from in terms not just of our labour market, but of our citizens. It is our duty to equip them with the right kind of skills and to ensure that they have every opportunity when it comes to making a success of their future.

Like many Members, I have many excellent examples in my constituency of outstanding leaders, teachers, education providers, schools and academies. All of them are pioneering and innovating. In the Witham constituency, we have the remarkable Connected Learning Multi-Academy Trust. It is headed up by a remarkable former headteacher called Mrs Jane Bass. The success of that trust is quite phenomenal in the way in which it has turned around failing schools that were within the local authority's remit. It has done that through demonstrating leadership and providing resource, sometimes with disagreements with the local authority on funding. We have all had to fight alongside our headteachers and our schools to really make sure that they can bring in the resources. Many hon. Members have highlighted what academy conversion does to enhance schools' financial resources too. School improvement plans also play an important role in turning around many schools that are not performing. That, again, is where resources are needed.

I want to touch on a couple of issues with academies and academy trusts. My right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards and, I think, everybody in the Department is fully aware of the Academies Enterprise Trust and the historical issues that have been associated with it. I urge Ministers never to take their eye off the ball with regard to governance. The governing structures of some of these rather big multi-academy trusts—in the case of the AET, one of the fastest growing trusts in the country—did not have the necessary oversight and accountability, and that then led to problems with school exclusions and other wider issues. That is only one of the trusts covering not just my constituency but neighbouring areas too.

Many parts of our communities and constituencies are experiencing considerable population growth. We are now looking at new developments in Witham town and in areas such as Stanway that come under the Colchester borough where we are seeing new investment in schools, which is the right thing to do.

[Priti Patel]

Only a week ago, we were speaking in Westminster Hall about another issue that has been raised today—financial support for children with special education needs. I do not want to go over many of the points that have been covered already. The governance reforms are welcome, as is the new 2015 SEND code of practice, which is vital. At the same time, however, the introduction of the education, health and care plans is leading to a much greater increase in demand, complexity in particular cases, and, unsurprisingly, pressures on local government and authority funding. Essex County Council has experienced exactly this. Yes, there has been more resource from the Government centrally, and in Essex that equates to over £3 million a year for the county council, but we still have pressures. For example, issues around the transfer of the block grant for schools from the county council are causing tensions locally.

There are many other issues around skills, apprenticeships and support for young people, but for the purposes of this debate we should say that we pride ourselves, as a country and a nation, on our education system. It is absolutely right that we all collectively work together to do more to provide the aspiration, hope and opportunity that will support the life chances of young people in our country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. In order to be able to get everybody in, I am going to have to cut the time limit to five minutes.

4.27 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) for bringing forward this incredibly important debate. I want to emphasise and add my voice to the concerns that many Members on both sides of the House have raised about the financial pressures facing so many of our schools.

The reason I wanted to take part in this debate is that schools in my constituency are literally at desperation point—and we know why. Mainstream schools have seen their general budgets savaged by 8% real-terms cuts since 2010. So when Ministers say that they are spending more, we know that that is not true, per pupil in real terms. In fact, it is a thinly veiled attempt to gloss over very real, serious and damaging cuts. That is demonstrated by the stark results of a recent survey of approximately 2,000 headteachers. One of the questions put to them was, “Do you trust what the Department for Education says about overall school budgets and the financial situation of your school?” Shockingly, fewer than 1% gave the answer, “I trust what the DFE says about school budgets.” Ministers cannot ignore that, or the other shocking results such as 80% reporting that teachers in their schools were contributing their own money to buy resources for their pupils to use. In addition, 86% said that recruitment and retention of teachers is getting harder, and 87% disagreed with the statement, “Any additional revenue or cash received in the financial year 2018-19 has been greater than additional costs in the same period.”

All that evidence and those abstract figures are borne out by the reality in our schools up and down the country. Headteachers in Brighton are writing to me in

desperate terms. They face sleepless nights because of the impact of the funding crisis on their ability to support pupils, particularly those with complex needs. Schools have to manage delayed education, health and care plans, as well as crippling pressures on local authority budgets. The LGA has identified a potential £1.6 billion deficit for special needs education, and yet the Government have responded with an inadequate £350 million. Headteachers say that that is too little too late and does not even cover local authority high needs shortfalls, which simply exacerbate the problems with mainstream SEND.

For example, teachers in my constituency say that the very successful Every Child a Reader scheme for SEND children can no longer be funded because their schools simply do not have the money. I have had so many letters saying that schools are having to drop crucial counsellor services and so on. There is real concern. I am grateful that the Secretary of State has said that he will meet a delegation from Brighton to discuss this issue, but it goes right across the country.

In the short time I have, I want to say a few words about sixth-form funding. There are so many areas of concern in education funding, but the pressures on post-16 funding are huge. I have two fantastic sixth-form colleges in my constituency—Brighton Hove and Sussex Sixth-form College, or BHASVIC, and Varndean—and an amazing FE college, the MET. They all feel massively under pressure because they do not have enough funding. Those concerns are, again, backed up by the statistics. London Economics found that in real terms, sixth-form colleges received £1,380 less per student in 2016-17 than in 2010-11. That is a 22% decline in funding. The IFS was also clear, saying that funding per student aged 16 to 18 has seen the “biggest squeeze” at all stages of education for young people in recent years.

At the same time, costs have risen. Students’ needs have become more complex, and the Government are asking more of schools and colleges. The purchasing power of sixth-form funding has been greatly diminished as a result. A recent funding impact survey by the Sixth Form Colleges Association makes shocking reading. It found that 50% of schools and colleges have dropped courses in modern foreign languages as a result of funding pressures; 34% have dropped STEM courses; a huge 67% have reduced student support services or extracurricular activities, with significant cuts to mental health support, employability skills and careers advice; and 77% are teaching students in larger class sizes.

The only way to address the funding crisis in 16-to-18 education is to raise the rate paid per student. Sixth forms can respond to the Treasury’s “something for something” mantra. An increase to the funding rate of at least £760 per student would have specific outcomes. It is the amount needed to provide student support services at the required level, to protect subjects at risk of being dropped, such as modern foreign languages, and to increase vital extracurricular activities such as work experience and university visits. I will conclude by echoing what others have said: these cuts are hugely counter-productive because they mount up and will mean bigger cuts in the future.

4.33 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be the tail-end Charlie in this high-quality debate and to follow the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).

I should declare an interest: I come from a family of teachers. In fact, my elder son is now a teacher too. What comes with that is a commitment to not only visiting schools but engaging with them, as well as with our further education college—the outstanding Gloucestershire College—and the University of Gloucestershire. I also ought to refer to the newest university in the country, Hartpury University, in the constituency of my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper). They all have masses to offer lots of people with skills and interests in various sectors.

This debate focuses on estimates and therefore inevitably on money. However, it is encouraging that the debate has been about not only what an Opposition spokesman in an earlier debate called “growing the cake” but improving the cake. How do we get the outcomes that are obviously affected by the input of money but where the relationship is not absolute? What really makes the difference?

I ask myself that a lot because in my constituency we have outstanding primary schools in areas that would be considered economically deprived, such as Tredworth, Coney Hill, Robinswood and Finlay Community School, which is on the verge of outstanding. Coney Hill is in fact rated the fourth best primary school in the county of Gloucestershire, and the second best is Field Court, also in my constituency, which is in a slightly more affluent part of the city. We therefore know that it can be done, and schools that have succeeded, such as Coney Hill, have not done so because they get a great deal more money.

It seems to me that the challenge for us as MPs is how to know what does make a difference. How can we be sure about what a school needs and whether it is getting enough of it? How can each school—every one of which will claim, and they may be right, that they have cut to the bone in order to make sure that every penny is used effectively—know how good they are as against other schools? How can we compare them, and how can we see how good they are at managing the business of a school, as well as being an outstanding place of learning for all the pupils there?

In this sense, of course, the statistics do not always help to shed light. The IFS, an independent body, tells us that the funding for five to 16-year-olds will have gone up by 50% in real terms from 2010 to 2020. If I translate this into a local figure, Gloucestershire schools will be getting 3.1% more in 2019, but salaries have increased by 3.5% and there are the pension increases as well. I deduce from that that this is an issue not of cuts—that is a very easy word to use, particularly in opposition—but of costs growing faster than the increases that schools, further education colleges and universities are getting from the Government. That is the challenge for heads and others who are running schools.

In a debate in Westminster Hall at the end of January on education in Gloucestershire, the Minister for School Standards referred to a number of things that the Government are doing to try to help schools with the issues I have mentioned. They include the schools buying club, the schools commercial team, the DFE schools buying strategy, a pilot project in the south-west of England at which 39 schools in Gloucestershire are registered, a focus on supply teachers and agency workers costs, and a benchmarking website. All these things sound very encouraging, but I sense—the Minister for

Apprenticeships and Skills will be able to shed light on this—that not all of these are really up and running or are easy-to-access tools for us or the heads of the schools.

I turn now to further education funding, which is of course the worst part for funding in the education sector, despite all that has been done with the new national colleges, T-levels, the investment in apprenticeships and so on. The fundamental fact we have to deal with is that we are in the bottom quartile for OECD skills, at level 4 or 5, for the education of our apprentices and others. At level 4 or 5, we are really way below where we should be in terms of the numbers studying. The letter I wrote with my colleague the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) to the Chancellor focused on the fact that, of all the areas in education that need funding, we really are looking for more to boost productivity and to boost what our young people can give. As 165 Members signed that letter, I urge the Minister to consider it.

4.38 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham).

Many people have made incredibly important points about the cuts in so many different areas—FE, schools and children’s services—but I would like to focus my contribution on how the cuts are affecting children with special educational needs and disabilities. Among the written evidence given to our Education Committee inquiry on SEND, there is a really useful summary from the Devon SEND Improvement Board, which said:

“The level of funding for SEND provision remains insufficient to meet increasing demand and puts significant pressure on existing budgets. Local authority, NHS and High Needs Block budgets have not grown to reflect the increasing demand for EHCPs and specialist provision. Tension related to funding is directly affecting parental relationships with professionals and organisations. The increase in general costs is affecting schools’ ability to support increasing SEN needs for example increases in national insurance contributions and the rise in living wage, with no additional funding to cover these increases.”

I am not sure about everyone else in the House, but certainly the concern that stands out for me is the tension affecting parental relationships, which is something I am hearing about in my surgeries and in all the evidence given to the Education Committee. Parents relate having to fight the system in order to get the support their child needs. That point was made a number of times.

One of the more worrying pieces of evidence, submitted by Christine Lenehan, is that in some special schools 100% of the children attending are there only because their parents were able to fight through tribunal. She said that is actually a class issue, because it is white, middle-class parents who are able to go to a tribunal and know how to work the system and where to get support. What about all those children whose parents do not have the same cultural capital to go out there and fight for them? They are not in these residential special schools, so where are they and what is happening to them?

Jean Gross mentioned the lack of interventions and support for children with SEND. She talked about the lack of speech and language therapies. I am sorry, but that is also a class issue. I know from parents in my

[Emma Hardy]

constituency that those who can afford it will of course pay for speech and language provision for their children. They will pay for additional tutoring and support, but that is not universally available to all children. The SEND cuts are not only cruel and unfair, but exacerbating the situation that children are already facing. All this talk of social mobility and equality of opportunity is not played out in the schools system that has been created by this Government.

I have two asks in relation to SEND funding. First, the Government should stop the idea of notional funding of £6,000 for schools and instead make that actual funding. Secondly, they should look at reforming the whole of SEND funding, because so much is based on what local authorities get. We know that there is no correlation between the number of SEND children in an area and the amount of money it gets, because that is based on a historical formula rather than an actual formula for that year. Instead, I would like the Government to consider some kind of SEND pupil premium money, which would follow the child around the country. That way, even if the child moved between local authorities, their parents would still know that they were entitled to the same amount of money to meet their needs. At the moment it is a postcode lottery.

In my last effort to be helpful—I do like to be helpful to the Government—I have identified some departmental savings that the Government might be interested in. One is the 84 interest-free loans that have been given to multi-academy trusts, with no information on how much was given or when it was given. A recent freedom of information request on what the associated conditions were was refused. We could also ask the Education and Skills Funding Agency to do an asbestos survey on buildings before schools actually move into them, which could save millions of pounds in decontamination costs.

We could also look into making savings by re-brokering and being a little more open and transparent about how much money has been handed out by regional schools commissioners to encourage academy chains to take on other ones. We could look at the pupil number adjustments, and at academy trusts getting extra money for schools with an estimated roll. How much money has been written off by that rather secret process? Could we have more transparency on that? Finally, could we look at helping schools to save the £200 million they collectively pay on entry fees for exams?

4.43 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) for introducing this extremely interesting debate. I also send my best wishes to the school mentioned by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). As a former teacher, I know the feeling of dread when the inspectors are coming—in Scotland we had Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, rather than Ofsted—so I send my best wishes to her school, and indeed to any school undergoing inspection at the moment.

As we have heard, school budgets are being stretched to breaking point. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) talked about the costs pressures, which include pay rises for teachers, higher employer

contributions to national insurance and teachers' pension schemes, and rising costs. There is an urgent need for a better commitment from the Government, because these issues become even more pronounced when we focus on sixth-form and further education spending, tuition fees and academies. We know that in the next six years there will be a 19% increase in pupil numbers in England. The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch highlighted that it is not enough to just increase education funding, as has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members on the Government Benches. We know that the budget is increasing, but it has to be a per-pupil increase in spending to have any impact.

I would just like to mention academies. We do not have academies in Scotland. In England, they were hailed as a way forward and a remedy for failing schools. At first, it looked as though that was the case, because money and resources were thrown at them. However, we now see a disturbing situation where some high-performing and improving academies are accepting fewer children from disadvantaged backgrounds or pupils with additional support needs. Surely that cannot be considered a success. Pupils with special educational needs must be properly catered for. If they are not being catered for within the academy system, there has to be greater spending on them in maintained schools and that increase must be significant. We are not talking about a small increase in per-pupil spending: if they have been taken out of the academy programme, we have to put serious investment into them in other schools.

On academies, the teaching profession in England has experienced an attack on terms and conditions, including the ability of school leaders to bypass nationally agreed pay scales. That allows schools to stretch budgets further or ensure huge pay awards to the chief executives of multi-academy trusts without, it seems, any scrutiny. Essentially, Department for Education funding has been syphoned off to pay individuals, regardless of the success of the academy itself. According to the Education Policy Institute, there is little measureable difference between the performance of academies and local authority schools. Underperformance in academy trusts, including a lack of diversity in the pupil cohort, must be challenged, as should academy trusts that are paying excessive salaries to CEOs, a point highlighted by the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel).

A number of hon. Members talked about post-16 funding, including the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and, in particular, the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds). We know that since 2010 this funding has been cut sharply. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) talked about the 22% cut in funding that has damaged the variety of courses, the number of STEM courses offered and the provision of extra curricular activities, and has resulted in larger class sizes.

Given the hardship that further education colleges are having to cope with, it is little surprise that Ofsted's annual report concluded:

"We are concerned about the financial sustainability of the college sector, and the clear impact that real-term cuts to Further Education funding can have on provision."

A long-term overhaul of post-16 education in England is needed. Courses must be linked specifically to needs in the labour market. We regularly hear rhetoric about positive destinations for young people, and how we have

to value all types of education and all outcomes for young people, but increasing the budget for further education is only a part of that. We also have to make sure that courses are properly tailored to needs in the job market. Brexit will make this issue even more acute, so England really should be looking at what we are doing in Scotland. In Scotland, we are ensuring that college places are actually linked directly to employment requirements, and we have the highest number of young people going on to positive destinations.

One issue that has not been mentioned this afternoon is tuition fees, but I think it is important if we are talking about budgets. We estimate that £23.4 billion is expected to be paid out in student loans this year, with capital repayments amounting to only £1.1 billion. As became apparent last December, these huge tuition fees betray a staggeringly short-term perspective that has added £12 billion to our national debt.

Up until now, it suited the Government to pretend that student debts are genuine loans, but it is now clear that many graduates will never earn enough to pay off these loans in full, which will result in the Government effectively having to pay the loans off. Why continue to put these pressures on students? Why not look at proper funding of our courses in higher education?

In conclusion, education funding must serve young people regardless of their background or educational needs. We must ensure that 16 to 19-year-olds are properly catered for. Funding must be adequate to ensure that young people avoid a lifetime of debt, and finally, meagre education budgets should not be siphoned off to line the pockets of rich businesspeople in academy trusts.

4.50 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): What a fantastic debate we have had this afternoon. I congratulate all the many colleagues from across the House on their contributions to the debate and, of course, the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), on opening it. I also take this opportunity to give my best wishes to Sally Hunt, the general secretary of the University and College Union, who has retired this week on health grounds. I wish her all the best for the future.

I would like to echo some of the points that many Members around the Chamber have made today and start by paying tribute to all the educators in our schools and educational establishments across England. They do a fantastic job to educate the next generation and to feed our economy with the skills that we require. It can often seem in this place as though we are all preoccupied with Brexit, but hearing from so many hon. Members today says to us that education is enshrined as one of the three pillars, as I see it, that helps social mobility and keeps our society going forward and our nation progressing in a global economy. The Chair of the Education Committee, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and the Education Committee member, my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), made powerful contributions, as always, based on the practical obstacles and on ensuring that better educational outcomes are there for all learners.

Like the right hon. Member for Harlow, I look forward to hearing the response for the Government from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills. I am glad to

highlight the work that goes on in further and adult education, which, of course, is where I got my qualifications, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) articulated, the reality is that since 2010, funding for adult and further education is down by £3 billion in real terms. Colleges are facing collapse and sixth-forms have been cut by a fifth. At the same time, there is a significant underspend for the apprenticeship levy, yet the money now lines the coffers of the Treasury rather than funding our education system. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) made a key contribution about the need for cross-departmental work and funding. We on the Opposition Benches are clear about investing in both further and higher education and replacing the current unsustainable system of fees and loans.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said, the Department's estimate is down by £12 billion. For once, that is a reflection not of cuts, but of the accounting change that means that it can no longer pretend that every pound of student loans is paid off. Can the Minister tell us how much additional funding will be needed to continue the current system, and will that be provided? She will know the alarm that universities have expressed about some of the leaked discussions around higher education funding.

Let me turn to the issue that we have heard raised time and again in these debates, including today, from Members across the House and across the country: the desperate shortage of funding for our schools. The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said that every child in this country deserves the chance to thrive, and on that, I absolutely agree with him. I also agree with his contributions about school exclusions, which I hope the Minister will address.

Last year, the Secretary of State told us that every school

"will see at least a small cash increase."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 536.]

In the spring statement, the Chancellor gave the House a guarantee that every school would receive a cash increase. Will the Minister tell us whether that guarantee will still be honoured?

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) spoke about her concerns with the national funding formula and cuts to her local schools, as did the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). Of course, the Chancellor had something else to say about schools in the last Budget: he offered them "little extras"—enough funding for them to buy a couple of whiteboards. Schools have lost billions of pounds and now they are offered a whiteboard! I hope that the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) are not on the naughty step at home, following their contributions today. Of course, the Education Secretary has promised that he would ask for at least some of those billions back. As my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) outlined, our schools desperately need the money now.

The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and the hon. Member for Colchester brought up the stat of 1.9 million pupils in good or outstanding schools, but I caution hon. Members: more pupils are in our schools and some of those schools have not been inspected for years. On league tables, I do not think that talking

[Angela Rayner]

about so-called “failing schools” is helpful for the teachers who deliver excellence in their classrooms in those schools every single day. My school would have been a “failing school”, but I do not think my school failed me—or I would not be stood at this Dispatch Box today, doing the things I do with the resilience that I have.

We are reaching the last financial year of the additional school funding announced in 2017. Will the Minister tell us whether there is any sign of that new funding from the Treasury? Children with special educational needs need the help most, and they are not getting it. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) raised the heart-breaking experience of parents and their children in need of additional support and the inequalities they face in the system. Despite the Prime Minister’s words, austerity is far from over in education. Ministers have told us for years that they are protecting school budgets, yet our analysis of the Institute for Fiscal Studies data found that school funding in real terms will be £1.7 billion lower in 2020 than it was in 2015. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) was right to highlight the pressures on the system and the need for the focus on outcomes and to crack down on the financial scandals and lack of oversight in some trusts.

Finally, I would like to address the early years. I welcome the Health and Social Care Committee report published today. I hope the Minister agrees that early years support can transform lives for the better. Yet across the country, children’s centres are closing, nurseries are under threat, childcare is underfunded and the shambolic roll-out of tax-free childcare left an underspend of around £1 billion. I hope that the Minister will agree that Sure Start centres desperately need that money.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) was absolutely right to raise children’s services, the pressures that they face and the fantastic work they do every single day, and to link that to the report out today from Action for Children.

This is an important debate, and I am glad that we have had it on the Floor of the House. But our children’s services, nurseries, schools, colleges and universities need not words, but actions. Investment in education is an investment in our collective future.

4.59 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton):

I thank the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier) for securing the debate. I can assure her that I will not resort to smoke and mirrors. That is not really my style. I will not necessarily be able to give her all the specific details about the money that I think she will want to hear, but I will respond to a couple of her points.

The Secretary of State is extremely mindful of the problems involved in asking schools to do more. He is determined to ensure that we do what we can to help them to manage their budgets and their workload. The hon. Lady mentioned high needs. An additional £250 million will be invested in 2019-20, and we are looking at some of the perverse incentives that currently exist, especially considering that first £6,000 that schools are asked to pay. The hon. Lady raised the issue of

asbestos exposure and capital budgets. The impact of asbestos in buildings on health, and the changes and challenges that it poses, are quite complex, but I welcome her comments about the schools survey that we have undertaken. The Department has established an asbestos working group, which includes the Health and Safety Executive, to address some of those problems.

A total of £23 billion has been provided for capital spending over five years—between 2016-17 and 2020-21—and we are on track to create 1 million new school places during the current decade. That will be the biggest expansion for two generations, and it contrasts with the loss of places between 2004 and 2010. Between 2010 and 2017, 825,000 additional places were created; that includes 90,000 in 2016-17 alone. I should add that 97.7% of families received offers from one of their three top primary school choices, and 91% received offers from their first choices. Those are important figures, because that is what matters to parents.

I will respond to some of the most pressing points that have been raised, but I should first point out that in 2018-19 the Department’s resource budget is about £79 billion. Of that, £18 billion is for higher and further education, £55 billion is for early years and schools, and £0.3 billion is for social care, mobility and disadvantage.

I welcome the contribution of the Education Committee, and the work of the Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), has been particularly valuable. He is right to remind the House that putting in more money does not necessarily equate to better outcomes. It is not as simple as that. Good outcomes are what matter, but good outcomes in themselves are not enough. We want excellent outcomes not only for those at school, but for those for whom school did not work. Many of them need a second, a third or even a fourth chance. I am, of course, delighted that my right hon. Friend raised the issue of further education, and I thank him for his kind comments.

My right hon. Friend talked about the importance of plans. It will certainly not be before time that we articulate a vision for further education, which is so often squeezed between the noises surrounding schools and universities. As my right hon. Friend rightly says, reducing inequalities in education has a wide impact, not least on people’s health—those who are better educated have better health—and it can also enable people to become socially mobile.

I was extremely pleased that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) reiterated the need to reform all education, highlighting further education. I assure her that we are very aware of the issue of maintained nurseries. I am aware that their need to know the situation is very pressing.

Robert Halfon: Will the Minister give way?

Anne Milton: I do not have much time, so if my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not.

My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) raised the issue of exclusions. We are not complacent, but I should point out that the number of exclusions reached a peak in 2008. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) raised a specific issue about local schools and academies. I think it is a mistake always to blame structures, but I understand her underlying point about accountability, which is so important.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)—although he was corrected slightly by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Meg Hillier), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee—raised the important issue of children's social care. He drew attention to the key role that early years education and care play in the eventual outcomes for young people. He made a predictably powerful speech. I worked with him when I was in the Department of Health, and I am extremely pleased to see him continuing his excellent work, albeit from the Back Benches. I know he has also been a champion for his local schools and their funding, as indeed has my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who reiterated similar issues. He raised one thing that has long been a bugbear of mine: the need for more certainty in budgets. He mentioned three-year rolling budgets, but whatever it is we are talking about something that gives organisations certainty.

I have already met the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) and she raised the issue of inequality and social mobility and the importance of local industrial strategies. She, like the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, highlighted the need for us to have an articulate and adequate clear vision for further education. I am sure she is aware that Bristol is one of the five cities in our “5 cities” project trying to increase diversity in apprenticeships. I met a woman recently in Bristol who demonstrated exactly what can be achieved through apprenticeships. *[Interruption.]* She was a single parent, and I am sorry hon. Members on the Opposition Front Bench find this amusing, but I found it very moving: she had been unemployed for 10 years and had a small child, and because of that project she had got a level 2 apprenticeship and was really proud of what she had achieved, and proud that her daughter was now proud of what her mother was doing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) has been a huge champion of further education and rightly pointed out the need for much greater emphasis on levels 4 and 5; we are looking at that at the moment. He also recognised the need to increase the number of people undertaking qualifications at that level.

I know the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) always tries to be helpful and it is always a pleasure to hear her contribution, and she rightly pointed out the inequalities that exist from those with sharp elbows fighting those tribunals.

We are investing an additional £1.6 billion in schools this year and next over and above the funding confirmed at the 2015 spending review. This significant additional investment means core funding for schools and high needs will rise from almost £41 billion in 2017 to £43.5 billion in '19-20.

We recognise the cost pressures that schools, nurseries and further education are under, but the Government have achieved a huge amount since 2010: 1.9 million

more children are being taught in good or outstanding schools; the attainment gap between rich and poor pupils has shrunk by 10%; a record proportion of disadvantaged students are going to university; and we now have a truly world-class technical education offer through T-levels and high-quality apprenticeships. There is massive reform in apprenticeships which has a life-changing impact. There has also been £100 million into the national retraining scheme, a partnership between the Government, the TUC and the CBI.

I am a lucky Minister to be able to contribute to debates that are often so well considered and passionate and I will never cease to be grateful to all those involved in education at every level. We all want the same thing: that whoever you are, wherever you are born and whoever you know, everyone has the chance to get on in life, and get a rewarding career and a job.

We on the Government Benches will not play party political games with education, but put children, young people and adults and education first and foremost, and we will not shirk the difficult decisions sometimes needed to make sure we achieve that end. Party political rhetoric has no place in a debate like this; it is, as many Members have said, the outcomes for those we serve that matter.

5.8 pm

Meg Hillier: I rise very briefly to thank all hon. Members who have contributed and put in such detailed preparation and to thank again the NAO for its work.

It is important that we debate the money, because ultimately that is what then shapes how policy can be delivered, and I reiterate my points made at the beginning: that we must look at the money and talk about the right baselines—per-pupil funding, not vast global amounts on different year bases, because that gives a confusing message.

The Government need to look at every area of spending and assess how effective they are being in delivering their outcomes. I may disagree with the outcomes, but it is right, as the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) said, that we focus on those outcomes.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions. This is not the end of this: the PAC will continuously look at education spending, value for money and outcomes, and I know the Select Committee on Education so ably chaired by the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) will do so as well. So the Minister will see a lot more of us, and I put the Secretary of State on alert that we will be poring over the numbers and challenging him at every step of the way to make sure he is getting as much value as possible for the taxpayer, for our pupils and for all those who work so hard in our education system from cradle to further education and higher education in order to deliver better outcomes for young people.

Question deferred, (Standing Order No. 54).

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE

Department for Work and Pensions

[Relevant Documents: Twentieth Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Universal Credit: managed migration, HC 1762; and the Government response, HC 1901; Twenty-first Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Universal Credit: support for disabled people, HC 1770; Twenty-third Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Two-child limit, HC 1540.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £880,517,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1966,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £170,914,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,334,611,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

5.10 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I am pleased to be bringing this debate today, and I thank colleagues from across the House who have supported it and who are here to speak. The spending of the Department for Work and Pensions is the highest of any Department and represents almost a quarter of all Government spending. It is therefore important to scrutinise that spending, especially as the 10.7 million people who rely on our welfare state are those who usually have no other place to turn.

The welfare state in Britain was set up by the 1945 Government in order to defeat the giant of want and to create a country fit for heroes, but 70 years later, across Britain we are seeing an increase in situations that we think of as part of the bygone era of the 1930s. Even around our Parliament today, we are seeing people sleeping rough on our streets, dying in the freezing cold. Across the country, we are seeing families queueing up for food banks, and disabled people left isolated without the care that they need.

Poverty rates are rising, especially among children and people in work. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's annual analysis of poverty tells us that 14.3 million people—more than one in five of our population—now live in poverty. That includes 4.1 million children, a rise of 500,000 over the last five years. It also includes 4.6 million people living in persistent poverty—the poverty trap that lone parents especially are unable to escape. And shamefully, 1.5 million people, including 365,000 children, now live in destitution, unable to afford even the basic necessities. In the fifth richest country in the world, those bare facts should shame us all.

The Government rightly tell us—as I am sure the Minister will do today—that the Department's spending is rising. It has risen by £31 billion, or 20%, since 2010. But alongside real wages falling for a decade, housing costs rising much faster than inflation, especially in areas of very high housing shortage, and cuts to so many of the local services that people rely on, our welfare safety net is in danger of not working. That is why I am particularly pleased that we are having this debate to look into the reasons for the seeming anomaly

of rising spending and rising poverty, and so that we have the opportunity to suggest some answers for the Department to consider.

We know that £27 billion of that £31 billion increase in the Department's spending relates to the state pension, with the triple lock and the single-tier pension delivering increased prosperity for most pensioners. That is good to see, but, as with many aspects of DWP spending, it does not tell the full story. While the state pension has increased, pensioner poverty has also increased. The rate of pensioners in poverty halved in the decade to 2013, but since then it has risen by 330,000 to 16% of pensioners. That change was partly due to reductions in pension credit, which now supports a million fewer pensioners, but also due to housing costs, which is a serious problem for the Department across the full range of benefit claimants.

The situation is worse for those who are not pensioners. The Institute for Fiscal Studies stated after the Budget that we will still see cuts of £4 billion a year to welfare spending on in-work age groups in the years to come. It is the particular and persistent focus on reducing spending that has played a major role in the increase in poverty, and destitution in particular. The emphasis on making welfare spending fairer to working people ignores the fact that the majority of claimants of state support are already in work. In the 2015 Budget the then Chancellor claimed that benefits should be frozen for four years because average wages had risen by only 11% while benefits had increased by 21% since 2008 due to high levels of inflation. The argument that real-term falls in wages should equate to even larger falls in the benefits on which so many in-work families rely fails to recognise the realities of life on low pay.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. We have seen changes over the past few years, including increases in some pensioner benefits and in the national living wage, but the group of people who stand out more than any other are those on benefits. It is utterly unacceptable that we can even consider maintaining the benefits freeze for one final year. It has to go.

Ruth George: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and pay tribute to her campaigning for people on benefits. I agree with the sentiment of her intervention, because over 10 million people are affected by the reality of the four-year freeze. When it was announced in 2015, inflation was just 0.4%, but it has been 2.3% and 2.6% in the past two years. Since the freeze's introduction, the cost of living for people on low incomes has risen by £900 a year. In real terms, the income received by a single person on jobseeker's allowance or income support of just £77 a week will fall by over £5 a week by 2020—a drop of £267 a year. When people on such benefits have less than £10 a week to spend on food, the loss of £5 makes a huge difference. Someone can just about eke out £10 a week for food, but eating for £5 a week is impossible. It is no wonder we are seeing such growth in the use of food banks.

For families, the freeze bites even harder. If it continues, low-income families are likely to lose out on an extra £210 a year due to inflation. If we see inflation rise because of disruption to trade or food tariffs or shortages, inflation for people on low incomes will be far higher.

If the benefits freeze ended a year early, that would provide an essential income boost to over 10 million people struggling on low incomes and reduce poverty for 200,000 people, so I strongly urge the Government to look at doing so as soon as possible.

Of course, welfare is in the process of being reformed, especially through universal credit. I worked for USDAW—the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—for almost two decades, so I know just how vital in-work benefits are to millions of families who struggle to get by on low pay and often low hours. I know that UC was designed to fix such problems to ensure that work always pays, and I applaud that aim, but the stark reality is that universal credit has led to a 30% increase in referrals to food banks where it has been rolled out. I see families in my surgeries facing eviction, and I give credit to the thousands of people who are organising food banks across the country to help people who cannot afford enough to eat, but that is not good enough. Food banks cannot cover the whole country—I know that from my rural area—and they should not have to, either.

I pay tribute to fellow members of the Select Committee, which has made recommendations to the Government on universal credit, and to members of the all-party parliamentary group on universal credit which, with me as chair, is producing a report on a whole range of universal credit issues—I am pleased that the Secretary of State has already committed to meeting us about it.

I thank the Government for the improvements they have already made to universal credit, and I welcome those changes, but we are still seeing problems. Some 5.1 million people in working families will see their income reduced, on average, by £2,300 a year, and 1.3 million people in out-of-work families, with even lower outcomes, will see those outcomes drop by £1,400 a year. At a time when persistent poverty and destitution are rising, the Government's flagship policy should not be looking to take over 10% of our population even deeper into poverty.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ruth George: I was asked to take 10 minutes, so I will have to wrap up soon. I am sure my hon. Friend will get a chance to speak.

I ask the Government to look urgently at three issues with universal credit. First, the five-week wait for payment puts people into debt right at the start of their claim, and the levels of universal credit are simply not enough to enable them to escape that debt. Secondly, the multiple deductions: people receive an advance, and they might have debts on top of that from tax credits, housing arrears or utility bills, and they end up with an income that they simply cannot live on. Thirdly, the support for children and adults with disabilities. This Government are proud of saying that they like to support the most vulnerable people but, as one of my constituents says, "If a six-year-old boy who is bedbound is not one of the most vulnerable and does not deserve support, who does?"

We need a system that treats people like human beings. Yes, it is down to money and, yes, it is down to support, and I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to personalised support, but that support needs people to implement it, not computers that simply say no and

not processes like the one I raised in a Westminster Hall debate on carer's allowance where carers are being taken to court under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and are being forced to sell their homes because they have made an error.

We want to see investment in jobcentres and DWP staff so that they can deliver the personal support that they want to deliver, that this Government want to deliver and that we all want to see. This Department covers a huge range of people and complex issues. We all need to have trust that our welfare safety net is still there. It is the hallmark of a civilised society, and I look forward to this debate helping us to bring it in together.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I thank the hon. Lady for her brevity, but it will be obvious to the House that we have little over an hour and a half left in the debate and that a great many people want to speak, so we have to start with a time limit of six minutes.

5.23 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions. I thank the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for leading the debate and for her speech.

I understand the issues that the hon. Lady raises, but, as a Conservative Member, I want to try to make a case for the positives since 2010. In doing so, I would not want it to be thought that I do not have constituents who have been let down by the system. We must always strive to do more and to learn from such issues, but the situation has existed for years under every Government—it has not only existed under this present Government.

I will touch on employment, universal credit and our work to help those with disabilities, sicknesses and impairments, all of which are so important because the Department is responsible for a quarter of all Government spending. A vast £215 billion is spent on benefits and pensions.

Employment is the greatest success of the Government that I have been supporting since 2010, as the unemployment rate has halved since then. The most important thing to me in my role of being an MP is to help people to find work, find hope over despair, find something to feel proud about and find something where they really contribute. It is about taking them from being people who rely on the benefits system when they do not want to do so and giving them a position where they are paying in to help others.

This has been a great success: we now have the highest numbers in employment since records began; we also have an unemployment level at 4%, which is as low as it has been since the early 1970s; youth unemployment has halved; female unemployment is at its lowest rate; and wages are now growing at their joint fastest rate in a decade.

I am particularly proud that our unemployment rate is half that of Eurozone countries. It is important to say that every Labour Government have left office with unemployment higher than when they took office. The unemployment rate rose from 2.1 million in 1997 to 2.5 million in 2010, whereas it has now fallen to 1.36 million.

[Huw Merriman]

Although there may still be matters that need addressing, this Government have reduced unemployment by 1 million and helped those people to find work and hope, so there is not that much of a stick to beat us with.

Let us look at universal credit, because it is part of our mantra of helping people into work.

Neil Coyle *rose*—

Huw Merriman: Of course I will give way. The hon. Gentleman now has his chance.

Neil Coyle: If the hon. Gentleman wants us to provide a stick to beat the Conservatives with, he could try the National Audit Office report that said categorically that there is no evidence to suggest that UC has got anyone into work. So where is his evidence?

Huw Merriman: The evidence states that those on UC are more likely to find work and to increase their earnings—that has been found as well. The whole idea of course is that work pays. *[Interruption.]* The very fact that unemployment has gone down by 1 million suggests that UC is helping people into work. If the hon. Gentleman does not believe that helping people into work is the right thing to do and that we should keep people on benefits, we have indeed failed, but I happen to believe that ours is the right way forward.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): There is something I do not understand here. Not only is there the five-week starting period, but what is now evident is that there is an 11-week starting period. Someone who is moving but staying in accommodation provided by the same social landlord will end up with 11 weeks when they get none of their housing benefit paid, and they are in debt from the very beginning. That has happened to dozens of my constituents. How does that possibly help people to get into work?

Huw Merriman: First, we have the two-week run-off with regard to housing benefit. We also have the system of advances. So I do not recognise those figures at all.

Heidi Allen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Huw Merriman: I will not give way, because I am taking quite a lot of time. The reality is that UC is designed to mirror the world of work. In the world of work, 75% of people get paid monthly, and so the benefits system is designed to do that, because everybody on benefits is supposedly able to find work and this system mirrors the world of work. It is the right system to help people.

Another aspect of UC is universal support. It used to be the case that when someone was on benefits they were languishing on benefits, no one cared about them and they did not get the tailored support that UC gives. Now if anyone chooses to go to their jobcentre, as I do regularly, they will find a completely different approach—one where there is compassion and tailor-made support. The work coaches—*[Interruption.]* It is all well and good the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) chuntering from the Benches, but if she had spent time with her work coaches, seeing the passion

that they have in getting their people into work, she would see that they have more effect in doing that than she has by sitting there chuntering away.

My view is that UC works, and 82% of those on UC believe it works, too. It is all well and good for MPs to knock it for political purposes, but if they wanted their constituents to be helped, they would get behind this system, rather than constantly knocking it for political ends.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Gentleman says that 82% are satisfied, but does he agree that 18% unsatisfied is still too high?

Huw Merriman: Yes, of course, because we should always strive for 100%, as I said right at the start. But when we hear Opposition Members talking, we might think that the figure is at zero—it is not. I spend the time with those delivering the support and those receiving the support, and they are happy with it. Let me compare that with the previous system of tax credits. They were rushed in so fast by the Labour party that we ended up seeing overpayments of £7.3 billion and people pursued through the courts to get that money returned. Where does that leave the party of compassion? A success rate of 82% is high when one considers the challenging circumstances of people on universal credit.

In my remaining two minutes, let me turn back to those on disability support. I find that many of those who have been assessed for PIP and ESA have been let down by the system. I say to my Front-Bench colleagues that we need to continue to look to do more to help them through the assessments. I recognise that they are very much tailored benefits that take account of the cost of a disability. By their very nature, there will be challenges, but universal credit is absolutely a challenge that we should meet.

Again, I come back to the employment figures: we have got many more people with disabilities into work than the Labour party did. Anybody with a disability should be told that they are just as able to find work, and that they have the support of the Conservative party to do so, as those who are not disabled. Failure to do that is complete discrimination. I am really proud of the support we offer. My office is a Disability Confident office: we want to make sure that we give people the exact same opportunities. I am proud of our position with regard to those with disabilities. The fact is that we are now spending an extra £10 billion to assist people, compared with 2010.

When it comes down to it, we are helping people to get into work—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) says we are not, but I have just said that there are an extra million people in employment under this Government compared with under her party's Government. The statistics do not—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We do not shout from the Front Bench, nor from any other Bench, but especially not from the Front Bench.

Huw Merriman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is notable that we can deliver rhetoric, shout and talk about the individual cases, which of course we should, but the statistics show that this Government

have got more people into work and are spending more money helping people on benefits. This Government have a record to be proud of, and I am only sorry that more of my colleagues are not willing to stand up and say so.

5.31 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): There has been a huge change in the debates that we have about poverty in this country. When I first came into the House, there were these rather distant debates in which we talked about what the poverty line should be and whether the Government's benefits were adequate. We now face a situation—certainly in my seat and in the constituencies of others—that is a matter not simply of poverty and people being hard-pressed but of destitution. We cannot be surprised by that, because although the Government have rightly increased the national living wage and personal allowances, most of the cuts in public expenditure to rid us of the deficit have fallen on families and poor families on benefits. If one message goes out from this debate to the Chancellor, I hope that it is that enough is enough. The Prime Minister has talked about our now being through the austerity period; if we are, the first groups who should feel the relaxation of the whip of austerity should be the families who have been so badly hit by the cuts imposed on them to try to balance the books.

There have been seven main cuts, and I wish to remind the House of how extensive they are. They are not cuts that affect pensioners: all affect those who are of family age—families with children. The first is the freeze, which my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) talked about. I congratulate her on securing the debate and on her contribution. Such a freeze is almost unheard of in our terms. In 1953, Harold Macmillan made the decision on behalf of the whole country that, as living standards rose, poorer people would benefit from those rises. Ever since then, Governments have tried to hold to that commitment. They have had varying degrees of success, but their intent has been that the poor should share in rising living standards.

Since 2011, we have had a freeze on benefits that means that the least advantaged—if I can put it in a sarcastic way—have suffered. For example, a single parent who is out of work and has one child has lost £888 of what their income today would be had the freeze not taken place. A single earner couple with two children have suffered the amazing cut in their living standard of £1,845. That alone, I hope, will get the alarm bells ringing in the Treasury, so that when the Chancellor makes his statement come the spring, we will see some change on banning the freeze for the final year.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am glad that the Chair of the Select Committee has raised the benefits freeze. Our research through the Library shows that this final year of the benefits freeze is due to raise an extra £1.2 billion in savings for the Treasury, because of increased inflation. Does he not agree that, as a result, this Government should scrap the final year of the freeze?

Frank Field: I hope that long before the Chancellor rises at the Dispatch Box—the position that the Minister will be in when he replies to this debate—he will have made the decision that there will be no more freeze.

He will say, I hope, that the freeze will be lifted, and I hope that, from this debate, we will build a movement in the country that convinces him and his Cabinet colleagues that that is the one overriding priority.

There are, however, six other cuts of which I wish to remind the House. The first of those six is the cut in council tax benefit. A total of 4.4 million families have been affected by this cut—of not paying council tax in full—with an average weekly loss of £3.

Let me turn now to sanctions, on which the Select Committee, the House and the Government quite properly indulge in debates. Three million people have been sanctioned since 2012. We know now that a person can be in work and sanctioned. I challenge the Minister to answer this when he replies to the debate: as a person can be sanctioned for not getting a higher income, even though they are in work, will he tell me how many work coaches in DWP have been sent for interviews by their colleagues because, given the amount of benefit that they draw as a result of the wages that they gain from DWP, they will now be sanctioned if they do not improve their income? Sanctions, therefore, form the second cut.

Another cut has come in the form of the lowering of the local housing allowance. Since 2013, 1.4 million of our fellow citizens have suffered an average loss of £50 a week. We are not talking about our salaries; we are talking about people who are earning very, very modest incomes from the benefits system.

On the bedroom tax, 704,000 of our constituents have suffered, on average, a weekly loss of £15 a week. A total of 197,000 households are affected by a benefit cut of between £63 and £73. Then there is the two-child limit, which affects 70,000 households, but which is likely to increase to 600,000, with an average weekly loss of £53. Any one of those cuts causes mayhem to the budgets of poorer people who have no savings—whether they are in work or not in work. I have witnessed in my constituency, as other Members have witnessed in their constituencies, an issue now not of poverty, but of people who struggle with all their might to maintain a roof over their heads.

Heidi Allen: I wish in a way that, at the time, I had been able to defend the courage of my good friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). He is right that employment is up, but for the parts of the country that my right hon. Friend the Chair of Select Committee and I have seen on our tour—I hate that word because it sounds like a holiday—of food banks, what we saw were people who were utterly on the edge. With the greatest respect, universal credit is not built to deal with people who have no financial resilience at all. They are the people that we are talking about, and these cuts have absolutely cut them to the bone.

Frank Field: And beyond. Families know they are finished as a family if they lose their homes, so the fight is to keep the roof over their heads. They go without food; they go without heat; and they go without basic necessities. This debate is, for me, the first time that we have in this House to confront the system for those of our poorest constituents who face not just poverty, but destitution. They are the ones who have paid the most to bring down the budget deficit, and they should be first in the queue, as far as the Chancellor is concerned, to get relief when he makes that spring statement.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I will have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

5.39 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is an honour to be able to speak in this estimates day debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on starting us off. It was a pleasure, for the first part of this Parliament, to serve on the Work and Pensions Committee with her, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle).

I will turn to some of the work we did together on the Committee in a moment. Before I do so, I want to return to the absolutely essential point that must always frame the current debate on benefits. A few years ago, before I entered this place, I was lucky enough to be the director of policy at the Centre for Social Justice, which looks at the root causes of poverty in the UK. One of the things that our research showed time and again, and that the research of my predecessors had shown, was and is that there is a human cost to worklessness that sits alongside the financial cost. The effect of being out of work for an individual, for a family and for large numbers of people in a given community is substantial. It affects people's self-worth, mental health, and family stability. In itself, alongside the monetary troubles that they have, it affects their resilience.

That is why I am so proud of the fact that it is under a Conservative Government that we now see record employment, and that under this Government we are finally starting to see wages rise. This makes an enormous difference to individuals, families and their communities. It is very difficult to put a monetary value on that, but very easy to see the value of it when we meet those individuals and families and go into those communities. It is a great legacy, because we now have 637,000 more children growing up in working households than we did in 2010. The long-term effect on those young people's future lives is enormous, because we know the cost and effect of children growing up in workless households, in entrenched worklessness. This is a real achievement.

Sitting alongside that, we have the welfare reforms that the Government have been bringing in since 2010, which are nothing short of revolutionary. I think that everyone across the House agrees on their aims. Everyone agrees on where we would like to be—that is, with a welfare system that actively assists, encourages and helps people to get into work, to sustain work, to take more work, and to become more self-reliant in order to be able to provide more easily for their families and for themselves. There is no doubt that universal credit is the mechanism to do that. There is also no doubt that this is a system in evolution.

I have been pleased, with the Select Committee and as a Tory Back Bencher, to work alongside the Government in helping a number of reforms to come through, such as the improvement in the taper rate and the improvement in work allowances. It was very good to see the Joseph Rowntree Foundation publish on 20 February a report showing that 3.9 million families on universal credit will

be better off as a result of the changes made at the November Budget last year. This is a sign of real improvement starting to make a difference to the lives of people it was intended to help. Similarly, the new Secretary of State has said that she will seek to increase the number of people who are getting direct payments to their landlords and support to main carers. That is very welcome. I would certainly like the additional surplus that this excellent Chancellor has created to go towards hopefully ending the benefit freeze as soon as possible, allowing investment in universal support, and reducing further the waiting times.

5.44 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I would like to begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on the way in which she opened the debate. The context set out for us by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), of the cuts since 2010 should be borne in mind during the debate. The House of Commons Library estimates cuts of £37 billion to working-age social security since 2010 and £4.8 billion to disability benefits.

I want to talk about a couple of cases, one of which relates to decision making in personal independence payment cases. I was interested that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) raised the issue of PIP being a bit of a problem. I have seen numerous instances of very poor-quality decision making in PIP cases, particularly when people are migrated from DLA to PIP. These are people with multiple and severe disabilities, often with lifetime awards under DLA, with fluctuating yet deteriorating conditions and usually with the higher rate mobility component entitling them to a Motability vehicle, but they simply lose that when assessed for PIP and consequently lose their cars and their mobility—the one thing that makes their lives a little easier.

In a recent written answer, the Government admitted that 44%, or a staggering 157,740 people, who were previously getting the higher rate mobility component under DLA had been reassessed and lost their eligibility to the equivalent rate. No doubt some people's entitlement has been raised—I accept that—but a lot of disabled people have lost their access to a vehicle and had their lives upturned and made much harder, often wrongly. These decisions, many of which are perverse, have come to my advice surgery. They are inevitably overturned when they finally get to an appeal, but that takes months. When they do get to appeal, 70% of cases are overturned, and people get their higher rate mobility back.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): People do not get any of that additional money during the months that they have to wait for an appeal. The Government say, "Yes, but if you do win the appeal, you get the money back," but for people who are short of money and on the breadline, this can mean many months of lost income.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is correct. For people waiting, it may as well be never. The Courts and Tribunals Service tells me that on Merseyside the average waiting time for an appeal is 38 to 42 weeks—10 months.

I have a constituent whose mother came to me in despair for help. She is a young woman of 29 years but has serious and worsening immune conditions, which

are baffling her doctors and causing her health to deteriorate. She has so many conditions, and I will not go through them all, but she can hardly walk at the best of times and sometimes is in a much worse state. She often has to visit four different hospitals, sometimes with two or three appointments a week, and has been using a Motability car to do so. However, she does not have her Motability car any more because it has been taken away. She had a lifetime award of higher rate mobility under DLA, but when she was migrated to PIP, she was only awarded the lower rate. She appealed for a tribunal hearing last May and is yet to receive a date for it. She was recently told that she is likely to have to wait another six months, but my office is trying to get that hearing expedited.

The young woman's mother came to see me because the car had to be returned and the first trip to hospital without it cost the family £17.50 one way. Her parents are low-paid workers and cannot afford to make such payments. The family were considering having to choose which hospital appointments to go to, which is a shocking situation. Fortunately, the Mayor of Liverpool has a hardship fund. I have referred her to that, which is now paying for the family's taxi trips, but she should not have to rely on that kind of assistance when she is entitled to the payments; I have no doubt that she will get her car back when she finally gets an appeal heard.

I want to raise another benefits issue affecting disabled young people who have special educational needs. It is about a difference between the rules for ESA and the rules for universal credit that seriously affects a small number of young people with special educational needs. My constituent Antony Hamilton has autism and developmental co-ordination disorder. He is in receipt of PIP and has an education, health and care plan, which required him to complete two years of specialist post-16 education provision before going on to do A-levels. As a consequence, he is a bit older than the typical A-level student, and he turned 20 at the beginning of the second year of his A-level course last October. The child tax credits and child benefit his father received for him ended at that time, but he still had most of a year of full-time education to go.

Under the legacy working-age benefits, Antony could have applied for non-contributory ESA to cover the financial loss, which is £170 a week. Under universal credit, however, there is no such option. He has been told he would have to apply for universal credit, undergo a work capability assessment and be required to work or search for it, which is something he cannot do because he is in full-time education. It is Catch-22 for people like Antony. He is working hard to achieve in educational terms, but his parents are having to spend their small savings to help him to be able to finish his A-levels. The letter his father got from the DWP said:

"The Department of Work and Pensions...does not set the policy and legislation relating to UC, this is the responsibility of the UK Government."

Will the Minister please enlighten us about who is setting this policy, and about what he is going to do to help Antony?

5.51 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): When it comes to problems with the Department for Work and Pensions and its policies, it is actually quite difficult to

know where to start. The people who depend on this Government Department often depend on it absolutely, and it absolutely is not working. It is not working for those on universal credit, assessments for personal independence payments are not fit for purpose, and the benefits freeze has been described by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as the "biggest policy driver" of poverty in this country.

Perhaps universal credit might work if the Government had not taken £3 billion out of the budget back in 2015—it might then fulfil its original and admirable brief of simplifying the system and helping people get back into work—but they did, and now it is not doing so. They did put half of the money back, but it still is not enough. I do, however, applaud the Secretary of State for her acknowledgment that the problems with universal credit have contributed to the frightening and unacceptable growth in the use of food banks by families in this country. We are also seeing late payments, increased stress for people who are often already suffering from stress or mental health issues, and a growth in homelessness.

Let us put this into context. The DWP will spend £184 billion on benefits and pensions this year. That is a quarter of all public spending. More than half of that, £105 billion, is on pensions, mainly the state pension. Only £22 billion is spent on working-age benefits, and a further £21 billion on housing benefit. As MPs, we have a duty to be careful with our language and to help change the story people in this country hear about the relationship between benefits and poverty.

The DWP should exist to help families break free from poverty, to support people into work who are able to work and to provide security in old age, but that is not what the story of current policies reflects or tells people who are listening out there. Policies such as the five-week waiting time for universal credit reinforce the feeling among claimants that the Department does not actually want to help them, at least not right away. What they see is a delaying tactic—putting off payments for as long as it possibly can. Meanwhile the Government have spent £370 million last year, and advance payments just paper over the cracks.

Huw Merriman *rose—*

Christine Jardine: I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon.

In my constituency of Edinburgh West, we are only just learning at first hand about the problems of universal credit, which was rolled out in the constituency at the end of November. We are much better acquainted with the problems caused by PIP assessments and inequities in the changes to the state pension age for women. Every week, I have people come through my door who have been refused PIP, often for the most inexplicable reasons. One constituent, who has had a Motability car for years, was told she did not need it because, if she could drive, she could obviously walk.

Huw Merriman: I tried to intervene on the point about universal credit. I do not believe that I voted on universal credit, because it was voted for prior to 2015, when I was first returned to the House. The policy that the hon. Lady is talking about was delivered by a Lib Dem-Conservative coalition, so it is actually her party's own policy.

Christine Jardine: Yes, it was our policy, and if it had been delivered with the amount of money that was originally intended, it might have worked. However, in 2015 the then Chancellor took £3 billion out of the budget, leaving the policy crippled.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Christine Jardine: I will continue, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The constituent I mentioned was told that she did not need her mobility car, because if she could drive, she could walk. However, the car was specially adapted for her disability—a disability she was born with and for which she wears callipers. She cannot walk any distance. It was nonsense.

If the Department wants to save money, it should get more of these assessments right the first time, and bring assessments in-house to help it to do that. In 2015-16 the Ministry of Justice spent £103 million organising ESA and PIP appeal hearings, not including the costs to the DWP of defending them, yet two thirds of those hearings went in favour of the claimant. Meanwhile, the Government spent £370 million a year on contracts to Atos, Capita and MAXIMUS to conduct those assessments. That money could be much better spent. Surely it would be cheaper and fairer for the DWP to invest properly in trained professionals to carry out these tests.

Perhaps the most important thing the Government could do—as we have heard, this is the starkest omission from their estimates—is to end the benefits freeze. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, that is the biggest policy driver behind the expected rise in poverty by the end of this Parliament. It estimates that ending the freeze a year early would cost £1.4 billion, reducing the number of people in poverty by 200, 000. It is absurd that the Government have been unwilling to accept that, given that they had the money to spend but instead put it to use by giving a tax cut to higher-rate taxpayers. Surely it is morally wrong to attempt to balance the books on the backs of the most vulnerable. The Government should use the spring statement to scrap the final year of the benefits freeze, and finally make the DWP work for the people it is intended to work for.

5.57 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I want to raise one topic, which has already been touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) in her excellent speech opening the debate: namely, the current five-week delay between claimants applying for universal credit and being entitled to their first payment. Like the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), I welcome the change of tone from the Secretary of State and her frank acknowledgment of the fact, long denied by her predecessors, that the roll-out of universal credit has increased demand at food banks.

The theory of the five-week delay was explained to us by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) during the coalition period. He explained that people leaving a job will have their last monthly pay cheque in the bank, which will keep them going for a month. In addition to the normal waiting days, which have always been part of the benefits system, that results in a delay of five or six weeks.

There are some obvious problems with that justification. For example, what about those who are paid weekly? The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) told us that 75% of people are paid monthly—that may well be right; I think it is about right—but what about the 25% who are not? According to the latest annual survey of hours and earnings, 16.2 % are paid weekly and 2.9% are paid fortnightly. What are those people supposed to do during this five-week gap? The Government's justification for the five-week gap clearly does not apply to them.

I have repeatedly pressed Ministers on this subject. They are not capable of providing a justification for the five-week delay for people who are not paid monthly. I do not blame them, because there is no justification. I confidently predict that we are not going to hear a justification that works for them when the Minister winds up this debate. What about people on zero-hours contracts? They cannot be confident of having had a monthly pay check when they left their last job either. Even more starkly, the five-week gap will also apply to the millions of people about to be transferred from legacy benefits to universal credit.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On zero-hours contracts, does it alarm the right hon. Gentleman that someone on universal credit who comes out of a zero-hours contract job could be sanctioned, whereas if they were on a legacy benefit, they would not be sanctioned?

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. On JSA, people could not be sanctioned for that and on universal credit they can. I agree with him that that is wrong. That was revealed in a very recent written answer.

Another written answer to a question I asked last week told us that 57% of new universal credit claimants are taking an advance. The proportion of those applying for universal credit who have a month's savings, as the policy assumes, is less than half. Most applicants have to go into debt to the DWP and take an advance to stay afloat in the first five weeks. Having been forced into debt in that way by the Department, far too many people find it impossible to get out of it. That is why we have seen the big increase in demand for food banks.

The Secretary of State suggested that the problem was temporary, because of early glitches in the roll-out of universal credit. No doubt it is true that the extraordinary delays that were experienced at the start of the universal credit roll-out did make things even worse, but the fact that over half of applicants are forced into debt by taking an advance, because they do not have the money in the bank that the policy assumes they will have, is why so many people have to use food banks and why so many get into arrears with their rent. This problem is hard-baked into the Department's current policy.

The Trussell Trust made the point that it found the increase in referrals to its food banks was 52% in areas where universal credit had been rolled out for 12 months or more, compared with a 13% increase for areas where it was, at most, three months since universal credit had been rolled out or it had not rolled out at all. In other words, when universal credit is well-established and has been there for at least 12 months, the increase in referrals to food banks is greater than when universal credit has just been introduced. The Trussell Trust has been pointing that out for a considerable length of time.

Another change of tone I welcome came in another written answer last week. It told us that the Department is now working with the Trussell Trust to see if it is possible to develop—I think this is how it referred to it—a “shared conclusion” about the impact of universal credit on food bank demand. I shall certainly be very interested to see that shared conclusion when it is published. The Trussell Trust briefing for this debate highlights the five-week delay as among the “urgent problems causing significant hardship”.

It goes on to say that Trussell Trust food bank referrals due to benefit delays are increasingly driven by this initial wait. It is a huge problem that needs to be fixed.

6.3 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for her excellent opening remarks.

The social security system was designed to be a safety net, but it has now become so threadbare and the holes so wide that many people are slipping through it. One key reason is that, although DWP spending has increased since 2010, we are supporting a larger pensioner population. There is also the introduction of universal credit, which replaces the previous system under HMRC. The generosity of many other support payments is decreasing. The changes and cuts to social security add up to savings of £30 billion for the Exchequer this year. That is going to rise to £36 billion in 2021 and £38 billion by the end of 2023-24, and this is in the context of Brexit.

The Government have sought to save money from changes to benefit rules, and we have heard about the freeze. There are the £4.8 billion cuts affecting disabled people; disabled people need that extra support because of the extra costs that they face, but that seems absolutely to have escaped the Government. The other thing is penalising children and children not being supported, as they have been in the past, and, of course, restricting women's eligibility for the state pension by pushing the state pension age up.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend has to remember that this is against a background of the £12 billion cuts that the present Government fought general elections on. They have no mandate for it, so this all falls into place. However, she raises a very important point that is still a very live issue—women born in the early '50s being denied their pension. The Government have just shut the door in their faces. I think that it is a disgrace given some of the problems that these women experience now. Some are on the poverty line as a result of all this. Does my hon. Friend not agree?

Debbie Abrahams: I totally agree. I have visited my hon. Friend in Coventry and many of the women from the so-called WASPI group who have been campaigning vigorously on this.

Although we did see a welcome increase in spending on UC in last year's Budget, at the same time, the disability benefits and benefits for carers went down. Even though there were changes to universal credit last autumn, 3 million people will still be worse off under universal credit. Nine out of 10 low-income disabled households will not benefit from the Budget increases,

alongside 640,000 self-employed households and 475,000 working lone-parent households. The effects of these social security cuts in the context of a rising cost of living are there for everyone to see. We have heard about the rise and rise of food banks. I never had a food bank in Oldham until this Government came in.

There has been the increase in personal debt and rent arrears. Eight million—the highest level ever—working households are in poverty. Two thirds of the 4.1 million children living in poverty are from working households. Four million sick and disabled people are living in poverty. Over 300,000 more older people are living in poverty since 2010. Our life expectancy is stalling—this is in the context of an increasing state pension age—and infant mortality, for the first time in 100 years, is increasing. Four babies in 1,000 will not see their first birthday.

The austerity agenda has not helped the economy one iota. Analysis used in the Office for Budget Responsibility's model has shown that the independent effects of austerity have been to stifle economic growth by at least £100 billion in the last year alone—that is £3,600 per household. However, it is not just about that—the human toll as a result of these cuts cannot be underestimated.

Last week, we heard about Jodey, who took her own life after she was found fit for work following her work capability assessment. The DWP failed five times to follow its safeguarding rules in the weeks leading up to Jodey's suicide, although it knew that she had a history of mental health issues. We learnt about 52-year-old Jeff, who won his appeal against his work capability assessment saying he was fit for work seven months after he had died. A few days earlier, we heard about 64-year-old Stephen Smith, whose emaciated six-stone body was photographed by the *Liverpool Echo* in a hospital bed. He had also been found fit for work. In my Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency, one of the worst cases I ever had involved a man who had a brain tumour. He was refusing to have the life-saving surgery that he needed because he was scared that he was going to get sanctioned. His medical team contacted me, pleading with me to intervene on his behalf.

I have a whole list here of different constituents and the struggles that they have had with the DWP, whether that is with PIP, the work capability assessment or UC. I want to particularly thank my team for the work they have done; without them, I could not do my job.

We are the sixth richest country in the world, and it is reprehensible for us to treat our citizens in this way. We must never forget that, like the NHS, our social security system should be there for all of us in our time of need, providing security and dignity in retirement and the support needed should we become sick or disabled or fall on hard times. It is a vital weapon in our fight against poverty and inequality—and one of which we should be proud, not ashamed.

6.10 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is strange that but a couple of handfuls of Members are here to discuss one of the largest budgets that the Government dispose of. We never analyse the expenditure very closely as it goes through Parliament; personally, I feel that a new system of assessing expenditure—more like a proper budgetary process in a local authority, frankly—is long overdue.

[Chris Bryant]

I will speak primarily about acquired brain injury, which may not come as a surprise to many Members. I know that people think that it looks as if I have had a brain injury of my own of late—it looks far more dramatic from behind than it is on the inside, but I am enormously grateful to people who have commented.

I want to talk about the issue because all too often an acquired brain injury, which might have come about through a road traffic accident, carbon monoxide poisoning, a stroke or a whole series of other means, may not be visible to the naked eye when we meet somebody. I have said this before in the Chamber, and it is true: the person standing in front of us in the queue, who is being difficult and seems drunk, might have a brain injury. All our judgmental attitudes may say more about us than about the person standing in front of us.

When somebody is being assessed by the Department for Work and Pensions for benefits, it is really important that the assessor has a full understanding of brain injury, for a multitude of reasons. First, such judgmental attitudes might be of no assistance whatever; and secondly, because the person's condition may vary—not only across time, but from day to day or at different times of the day.

One of the most common symptoms of an acquired brain injury, even a relatively mild one that may have followed concussion, is chronic fatigue. I do not just mean feeling tired, as we might from day to day in the normal course of things, but real debilitating fatigue that means that we simply cannot get out of bed—not through laziness, but through utter fatigue at the core of our being. The Department for Work and Pensions has found it very difficult to cope with assessing somebody in that situation without resorting to language of, “Pull your socks up, chap!”

I know that the Minister is keen to see whether there are ways for us to work this out better, and I, along with the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury, am really keen to make sure that every single assessor has some understanding, at least, of acquired brain injury—and, if they are not sure, the ability to refer the individual to another person.

There is another element to the issue. Fatigue is one of the most common elements of an acquired brain injury, so someone with one needs to harness all the energy they do have to strengthen their brain and recuperate. That requires a superhuman effort. I have spoken to individuals who have been through major road traffic accidents. They know that all the stuff they do with their doctors and clinicians—all the neuro-rehabilitation—is about how they strengthen their brain. But the benefits system is so complicated that it makes them feel like a number rather than a person; they find that they are using their energy just to deal with that, rather than making themselves better.

There could be a real advantage if there were a grace period of four or five years for people who have had a brain injury, so that once they had their first assessment they would know they would not have another for a set period. This is not about spending money; it is simply about enabling people to resuscitate and revitalise their own brains.

There is an additional problem which is known as the frontal lobe paradox. People may present extremely well and do well in tests, but some of the other elements

of their executive function simply do not work as well as they might. That is why it is so important for us to have a system that can respond to individual needs. I hope very much that in the coming months we will be able to develop the system further, and that Ministers will work onside, to ensure that we can address those needs.

6.15 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): Like others, I pay tribute to our colleague the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this important debate.

In the limited time available, I want to concentrate on a couple of elements of universal credit in which technical failings still cause real difficulty for individuals who receive it. I am aware that the new Secretary of State has been in listening mode, has taken on board some of the criticisms that she has heard in the House, and has improved and applied the suggestions that have been made. I hope that the Minister will give some feedback on these specific issues, so that the Department can improve the position.

When people who are moved on to universal credit already have a medical condition or disability, they are immediately placed in an assessment period similar to the one that in which they were placed when receiving employment and support allowance. The problem is that the period can be as long as 14 weeks, during which time their incomes can be cut by as much as £200, £300 or even £400 a month. If people on low incomes must wait 14 weeks for the result of an assessment that they have already undergone to receive ESA, that is clearly an anomaly in the universal credit system, which I urge the Minister to examine, respond to, and fix.

There is a second element of universal credit that involves an anomaly. When someone who has been receiving a severe or an enhanced disability allowance—which is only received by those with very significant impairments—moves on to universal credit, that person will automatically lose the additional money. The point of the enhanced disability allowance, which has existed for a long time, is to help people with severe disabilities to receive that little bit of extra money which enables them to function and lead secure and independent lives. I ask Members to imagine immediately losing up to £300 or £400 a month. It would catastrophically damage one's income. I should be grateful if Ministers revisited and fixed both those anomalies.

Let me finish with a couple of real stories of the kind that we all encounter in our constituencies. They concern tribunals. My senior casework manager, Scott Stevens, is an outstanding advocate for disabled people. During both my times in Parliament, I have always done my best to ensure that he, or one of my team, represents disabled constituents at tribunals as their advocate. I pay tribute to Scott: he has a success rate of about 85%. When disabled people come to me in connection with tribunals and we are able to support them, we win 85% of those cases.

“Win/lose” is rather inappropriate language in this context, and I will explain why. We won a case at a disability tribunal on Monday. Again, Scott was there, acting as an advocate. What did we win? This was an individual who has between three and five epileptic episodes daily, both during the daytime and in the evenings. She had received the personal independence payment for a long time, but was knocked off it 10 months

or a year ago, so we had to go to the tribunal to enable her to be put back on to it. I repeat that this is someone with an epileptic condition experiencing three to five episodes a day, yet she was considered not suitable to receive PIP. Members in the Chamber will not be surprised when I tell them that she was restored to 11.5 points so she now gets her PIP entitlement. That is just wrong: it is wrong that she has had to wait 10 months—and we can imagine the amount of debt my constituent is in because obviously she has not been receiving the full entitlement for 10 months. So I pay tribute to Scott Stevens for winning that case and I pay tribute to my constituent and I am glad she has got her PIP entitlement back, but I really do think the DWP has to revisit this so people do not keep having to go to tribunals.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am afraid we have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

6.20 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I am pleased that the House is having this debate today because it has given Members an opportunity to highlight how the DWP is not being resourced properly. The DWP has the single largest departmental budget, yet it finds itself under-resourced when it comes to dealing with the consequences of the Government's welfare reforms.

The Government's welfare reforms, be it universal credit or the personal independence payment, have disproportionately hit the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. Just look at what has happened to those claiming income support and jobseeker's allowance; both benefits are based on the principle of supporting those already in, or seeking, employment, yet the Government's decision to include both benefits within the benefits freeze is undoubtedly having the opposite effect. There has been a real-terms decrease in the basic rate of income support and JSA, falling from a high of £78 in 2012 to £72 in 2019. The Trussell Trust highlights that low income was the main reason behind 31% of referrals to its food banks from April to September 2018. That highlights to me that the Government's benefit freeze is creating a crisis of in-work poverty—a crisis which the DWP is currently not equipped to address. I urge the Government to bring an end to the benefits freeze now. Prices are rising and the DWP should be properly resourced to support low-income households—households which are currently set to lose £200 this year because of the benefits freeze.

That brings me to the issue of sanctions. I have consistently called on the Government to bring an end to the cruel sanctions regime. There were over 15,000 sanctions taken in April 2018, with the clear majority being implemented against UC claimants. This is despite an admission in a DWP report in October 2018 that there was no evidence that sanctions encourage claimants to get into work or increase their earnings. I was disappointed that the Government chose to reject calls from MPs to ease the burden of sanctions on some of the most vulnerable claimants, including single parents and those with disabilities. There should be a maximum period for which a sanction can apply and greater understanding that some claimants will miss appointments because of issues around health, childcare, finances and even local transport failures.

Members from across the House agree that there are real problems with UC and that the DWP has not been properly resourced to deal with them. The most glaring issue with UC is the five-week wait. The DWP has tried to take steps to address that, but those measures are either time-limited or do not go far enough in supporting those transitioning on to UC. With 1.6 million people expected to transition on to UC this year, it is vital that the Government act now to equip the DWP to deal with this problem.

More than 70% of PIP appeals found in favour of the claimant between January and March 2018. This represents a 17% increase in successful PIP appeals since January to March 2015, and we have to ask why the DWP has spent £108.1 million since October 2015 to fund legal professionals and their staff to fight these appeals while claimants are left to shoulder the costs of their appeal as a result of this Government's cuts to legal aid. The Labour party wants to bring back legal aid.

I stood with the DWP staff in Coatbridge when it closed its office in 2017, but, sadly, we lost that fight. The building is still empty; why not reopen it and bring back the resources to Coatbridge?

6.24 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on opening the debate and setting the scene for us. I want to talk briefly about the position in Gateshead. My constituency is wholly contained within the local authority area of Gateshead and I want to touch on various points. We are seeing many of the worst problems occurring in my constituency. We had the full roll-out of universal credit in October and November 2017, so many of my constituents did not benefit from the tweaks that we had later. That clearly does not apply now, but there were some problems earlier on. Yes, people who have applied since the changes have seen the benefit of the roll-over of two weeks' housing benefit, but many have been left in a difficult situation.

The housing company that manages the housing stock across the Gateshead Council area is the Gateshead Housing Company. According to up-to-date information, there are currently 3,087 tenants on universal credit who even now, collectively, have arrears of £1.8 million. That is an average of £583 each, up from an average of £283 before universal credit. I am told that this is caused by the delays in receiving payments. I am also told that 41% of the tenants of the Gateshead Housing Company have been put on alternative payment arrangements, which is a much higher proportion than either the Government or the company expected. This is not a case of the authority or the housing company leaving people to the worst of the system; this is happening after people have had help.

This builds on existing issues resulting from the bedroom tax, or the under occupancy tax—whichever you want to call it, the problem is the same. It involves those who do not have a chance, whatever they might want to do, to move to a smaller property. There were 1,579 people affected by that, and we can see a cumulative effect building up. The roll-out figure for people going on to universal credit has been much greater than expected. As I say, this is not an area in which people have been left to struggle, but there is still a problem with the housing revenue account.

[Liz Twist]

I want to speak briefly, and quickly, about a report commissioned by Gateshead Council into the impact of universal credit. These are the headlines. First, those claiming universal credit found the experience complicated, difficult and demeaning. Secondly, the consequences of waiting five weeks for their money—and in many cases up to 12 weeks, with an average wait of 7.5 weeks—pushed many people into debt, rent arrears and hardship. For many of them, this included going without food. Thirdly, the staff supporting claimants found the system to be inconsistent, with inaccurate advice being given and difficulty in correcting what were clearly mistakes. Fourthly, universal credit is not working for vulnerable claimants, and it significantly adds to the workload of the staff supporting those claimants. I could go on, but I do not have time to do so.

We have also heard about the difficulty for people moving from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment, with many people having their benefits reinstated on appeal. It cannot be right that the system allows people to go through all that agony, only to then reinstate their benefits. We have to get that right. Finally, I want to mention one of my constituents, Rev. Tracey Hume, who has said:

“I volunteer with a food bank. I am also a Methodist minister who has had to find benevolent funds to pay for gas and electricity while people wait five weeks for their first payment. We cannot expect people to live like that.”

6.28 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): A few hours ago, our city bid goodbye to Kane Walker. He was a young man who died on our streets in the cold of January. A man gone; a man who should still be with us; a man who, together, we have failed to save. And yet Kane Walker was not the only homeless man to have died in Birmingham. More than 70 homeless people have died on the streets of our city over the past four years. That is why I say to the Minister that the core of the debate today is not numbers or statistics but the moral emergency of homelessness that is now out of control because the safety net has been shredded around people who are only a couple of twists of fate away from the pavement.

When the National Insurance Act 1946 was passing through Parliament, creating the Minister's Department, Clem Attlee himself moved the Second Reading. He was absolutely determined to see a social security system in this country that would deliver freedom from fear of want. He wanted to slay the five giants of injustice that Beveridge identified back in 1944. However, look at the evil giant of unemployment today. In Birmingham, youth unemployment has shot up by 23% over the past year, with 15,000 more young people now out of work. When Beveridge launched his report, he talked about the giant of disease. Today, disability is knocking more people into poverty than ever before, and yet 33,000 people in our region have been stripped of their right to PIP over the past few years, plunging them into a poverty from which it is difficult to recover.

When Beveridge talked about his five giants, he talked about freedom from want, and yet nearly 60,000 people in our region last year had to rely on food banks—a third of them children—which is a rise of nearly a third over the past few years. The giants of injustice that

Beveridge identified now hunt and haunt us on the streets because of the collapsing safety net, and it is the crisis of universal credit that is at the core of the problem. I was amazed to discover in an answer to a written question yesterday that the Mayor of the West Midlands has not written to the Government once in the past year to express concerns about universal credit.

In my last minute I will rattle through the many different problems that Birmingham MPs have identified. There is wholesale confusion about eligibility for housing benefit and universal credit. Huge variations exist in the deductions made for advance payments. The self-employed experience long waits for correct payments. Sanctions are issued against those who are too ill to attend interviews. Those who challenge the inappropriate use of sanctions face huge benefit delays of up to five months. Constituents are forced to travel across the city to access IT to fill out online forms. Constituents with mental health problems are denied the right to face-to-face support. There are process delays and confusion about getting link codes to connect to childcare components, and the same applies to entitlements. There is total confusion about those moving from non-UC areas into UC areas. More confusion exists around eligibility for free prescriptions. Finally, there is complete confusion for our EU neighbours who have to pass the habitual residence test once again. In one of the richest countries on earth and in a city like mine, how can it be that homelessness has spiralled by 1,000% in five years? The system is in crisis, and this Government need to put compassion back into the system where it belongs.

6.32 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the impassioned, articulate and erudite speech by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and to speak from the Front Bench for the SNP. It has been a good debate, and I commend the speeches from the hon. Members for High Peak (Ruth George), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the many others who made fantastic speeches. I agree with the Chair of the Finance Committee, the hon. Member for Rhondda, that this debate is far too short and that it is no way for us to scrutinise the spending of the largest-spending Department.

While I agreed wholeheartedly with all that was said by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, he listed a number of problems and areas that require improvements, and the Scottish Government are already acting on two of them. I hope that he will reflect on the fact that the Scottish Government have maintained council tax benefit and fully mitigated the bedroom tax, and we can see the difference in the child poverty in Scotland as a result.

The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), who is not in his place, was right to say that work is the best route out of poverty, but while the nations of the UK have record employment levels, child poverty rates are still rising. We know that the Government are about to publish some very damning child poverty statistics, so Conservative Members cannot ignore the need for greater state intervention in this area. It cannot just be about work.

In the limited time available to me, I will raise a number of topics that expand on some of the things that have already been said by others. First, I want UK Ministers to look in greater detail at the benefits freeze, which was introduced in the 2015 Budget—a Budget, of course, that attempted to obliterate the social security system in these isles. The freeze has seen the value of the benefits affected drop by 6.1% over a four-year period, which has hit households hard and is seen by many groups as the key driver of rising child poverty. The Resolution Foundation said this month that child poverty is projected to rise by a further 6% by 2023-24, which would mark a record high.

Billions of pounds of savings have been made through the benefits freeze on the backs of the lowest-income families. In the final year of the freeze, the Exchequer is set to achieve even greater savings than anticipated. The higher than anticipated inflation rate means that the freeze will save over £1.2 billion more next year than the £3.5 billion that had been targeted.

When we know that the freeze is contributing to higher rates of poverty and that the Treasury is about to save more money than even it had targeted, surely the final year of the freeze needs to go. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has already said that she does not want to see the freeze continue any longer. She is acknowledging the difficulties it has caused, so why do she and others not go one step further and stop the final year? The spring statement would be the ideal opportunity for that to happen.

I turn now to an area that the Government do not want to be debated. I have called for a debate and a vote on this issue on three occasions, and other Members across the House have, too, but we are being ignored by this Government. UK Ministers want to enact a piece of legislation that is seven years old—it was brought in two Governments and two Parliaments ago—to cut pension credit entitlement. It will mean that mixed-aged couples will no longer be entitled to pension credit and will have to claim universal credit if one member of the couple is under state pension age. It has been estimated that this will cut £7,000 from the incomes of affected households.

When the measure was passed in 2012, we were in a very different political and economic landscape. Pensioner poverty was decreasing, but now we know from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that pensioner poverty could be on the rise again. It is clear that this Government need to seek a new mandate for the cuts. They need to test the will of the House on what it has inherited and see whether it is still the right thing to do.

Staying with pensions, we know that a number of those who will be affected by the cuts to pension credit will be some of the 1950s women who have been ripped off on their state pension entitlement by this and previous Governments. The UK Government must do more to help the WASPI women, and they must listen to some of the suffering that cutting their state pension entitlement has caused. Despite the rises we have seen via the triple lock, it is worth pointing out that the UK state pension remains one of the most miserly in Europe.

An area where the new Secretary of State has shifted ground is on the two-child policy. She has accepted that rolling out the two-child policy to children born at any time, not just those born after the policy was introduced, would be unfair. We appreciate the small steps the

Government have taken in some areas of universal credit, including the two-child policy, but they are clearly not enough. Given that the Secretary of State has accepted the injustice of one aspect of the two-child policy, surely she does not have far to travel to accept that limiting social security payments to two children is morally and socially wrong in its entirety. I urge her to rethink this disastrous policy, which is already forcing more children into poverty.

There is also a growing campaign, as we have heard again today, for the Government to do more on the five-week wait for universal credit. They have taken some steps to assist people moving from the legacy system to universal credit, but they have not gone far enough. A good place to start would be to use the assessment period for the advance payment of UC proper. If there is an acceptance that people need an advance, why say that the money needs to be paid back? People cannot be expected to live off fresh air, and they should not be expected to prolong indebtedness or financial hardship.

The pressures of UC do not stop at those who are receiving it. We heard yesterday that the Public and Commercial Services Union members who are working at service centres in Walsall and Wolverhampton have balloted to strike over changes to workload, recruitment and staff consultations. On top of the problems in UC, ongoing scandals are facing the personal independence payment, employment and support allowance, which was debated yesterday, and the withdrawal of disability premiums—even with some transitional provisions from this Government, this is letting disabled people down.

Meanwhile, the Scottish Government are building a social security system based on dignity and respect, one that garners the confidence of those who need it and the buy-in of taxpayers who pay for it. We have created a carers allowance supplement, to uplift payments by £442 a year, better to reward carers for the incredible job they do. We have introduced the best start grant and baby payment in Scotland, which expands on the UK's maternity grant by providing eligible families with £600 on the birth of a first child and £300 for subsequent children, without a cap on the number of payments made. What the Scottish Government have done already, and plan to do with new announcements soon, shows this Government what is possible.

In conclusion, while the problems I have listed with the UK system persist, we cannot be expected to agree with the Department for Work and Pensions estimate. The Government need to do more and come back having built a system based on dignity and respect, as we see starting in Scotland. This Secretary of State, the sixth I have faced, is taking steps in the right direction. She has admitted that there are problems with the two-child policy and finally admitted that there is a link between this Government's social security policies and the rise in food bank use, but they must go further. I know she is pleading with the Treasury for the resources to go further, and we hope we can hear of that at the spring statement.

6.41 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing such an

[Mike Amesbury]

important debate, and of course thanks go to the 14 Members from across the House who have contributed to it. They made very powerful speeches indeed. This is my first experience of closing an estimate's day debate for the Opposition, but, sadly, it is certainly not my first experience of a debate in this Chamber that highlights the chaos, unfairness and even sheer inhumanity of our current social security system under this Government. Debates such as today's have been a depressingly familiar occurrence during my short time in this Chamber. They have been depressingly familiar for those of us who are debating and highlighting these issues, but of course the position is far worse and far more serious for those experiencing them, as was illustrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). This system is dehumanising and frightening, and it is, on too many occasions, a tragedy.

As we have heard today, report after report from the Work and Pensions Committee, the National Audit Office and the Trussell Trust has offered major warnings about the Government's direction of travel. Their findings have been echoed throughout this Chamber once again today. It is troubling enough to hear yet more accounts from right hon. and hon. Members of the human cost of this Government's approach, in contributions such as that from my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak, who spoke about the rising child poverty evidenced by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and that from my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who spoke about the human tragedy that is homelessness and youth unemployment, but what is worse is that despite some of the spin, the warm words and the change in mood music, there is still no systematic evidence that this Government are acting in a coherent manner to address the problems that Members have highlighted today.

Universal credit has caused severe hardship for hundreds of thousands of people, yet the DWP is still failing to address the key issue of the five-week wait for an initial payment, as stated by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). In the past year, 57% of new universal credit claimants have received an advance payment. It is a debt. That is a clear indication of the dire need people are experiencing. Make no mistake: just because 57% received a loan—an advance payment—that does not mean that the other 43% had no problems with the service at all. For many of them, the reality was not a good experience. Their experience was delay, debt, hunger and food banks.

Recently, the Secretary of State finally admitted what no one before her would admit but almost everybody in this Chamber already knew: the growth in food banks is linked to universal credit. It is belatedly welcome that the Government are finally, partially, waking up to the truth, but accepting it is not enough: action is needed. All too often, the only action from this Government is to press ahead.

Despite all we have heard, the Government are intent on seeking parliamentary approval for a pilot of managed migration to universal credit for some people, to start in July this year. The Secretary of State claims to have listened to charities and Opposition Members when we evidenced the chaos and hardship that unmanaged migration would bring to 2.78 million people. Let me

be clear: that chaos and hardship for 2.78 million people will now be chaos and hardship for 10,000 people. We are calling for a halt to the process altogether.

To add insult to injury, the Government claim that nobody will be worse off as a result of the changes, but, as evidenced by many of the contributions today, that really is not the case. Their belated, forced and haphazard approach to protecting severe disability premium claimants, some of whom were set to lose £178 per month, suggests a Government without a full understanding of how their own policy will affect people. There remain circumstances in which people will lose transitional protection—for example, when they become a couple or if they separate. How can a party that once claimed to be the champion of the family implement a policy that makes people think twice about formally entering a relationship because of the financial cost or, even worse, condemns people to staying in one that is not working and that is not safe, because they cannot afford to leave?

Were someone without prior knowledge or experience of what we are debating to have sat in the Chamber today, they would have heard these stories and asked a simple question—why? Although it is true that backgrounds to stories can be different and the reasons multiple, there is a simple answer to that simple question: austerity. The Library estimates that cuts to spending on social security and working-age tax credits will mean that some £37 billion will have been cut from social security by 2021-22, compared with 2010. Meanwhile, the richest corporations, including those in the financial sector that should shoulder some of the responsibility for austerity, have had tax cuts of more than £110 billion. That is not fair, right or just.

Child poverty is up, with a massive 4.2 million children in need; in-work poverty is up, and now affects 8 million people who are in work; and wages have not recovered to 2008 levels. This Government have spent nine years using social security as a vehicle for cuts; meanwhile some of their friends in the financial sector and in the banks have received bonuses and unjustifiable tax cuts. Ministers may claim a jobs boom, but the reality for thousands and thousands of our constituents is zero-hours contracts or fearing for their jobs, as more and more of our manufacturing and retail base faces mounting insecurity and instability.

Despite all that, the Department for Work and Pensions supplementary estimates show that the Department did not bid for additional 2018-19 funding from the Treasury. Austerity is not over, and there appears to be little or no attempt from the Department for Work and Pensions to make it so. The Resolution Foundation has estimated that the fourth year of the benefit freeze alone saves the Exchequer £1.5 billion in 2019-20, making a total of £4.4 billion over the four years. That has meant that the poorest and most vulnerable people are falling further and further behind. The record shows us that when it comes to social security, this is a Government who do not change course.

6.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate—a vital discussion on how this Government, and our Department in particular, support people across society. I wish to pay tribute to the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George). We have not

always agreed on every single issue, but it is clear that she is a tireless campaigner in this area. Her speech was particularly measured. She highlighted some genuine concerns that she has been pushing on in the years since she was elected. She should be proud that, in some of those areas, she has already effected change, and I know that she is an incredibly valuable member of the Work and Pensions Committee. I had the pleasure of joining her for about four weeks. Securing this debate is a tribute to her efforts.

There have been some very good speeches. In the limited time that I have, I will not be able to cover all of them, but I and my ministerial colleagues have taken note of everything that has been said and, where relevant, we will make direct contact.

Last year, the Department supported 20 million people—more than half of the adult population. We spend somewhere in the region of £190 billion, slightly more than a quarter of Government spending, and the equivalent to the GDP of Portugal. We have always been proud to share the proceeds of our growing economy with, often, some of the most vulnerable people in society.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) made a powerful point about the impact on workless households and what an enormous difference that work can make. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) said that, probably, the Government's greatest achievement is our record on employment. Since 2010, the employment rate has increased to a joint record high. Youth unemployment has almost halved; the female unemployment rate is at a record low; and nearly 1 million more disabled people are in work than in 2013.

Last year, wages grew at their fastest rate in a decade at 3.4%. We are going further to support those in work, with the introduction of the national living wage, which is worth £2,000 a year. The changes to the income tax threshold are worth £1,200 a year. We have seen the doubling of free childcare and the extension of childcare cost support through universal credit. Money being spent on childcare support has risen from £4 billion in 2010 to £6 billion today—a 50% increase. However, this jobs miracle is not a given. Our labour market is outperforming many other developed countries: more people have moved into work in the UK since 2010 than in France, Spain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria and Norway combined. What a stark contrast that is to the previous Labour Government, and every other Labour Government who have always left office with higher unemployment.

Many of the speeches have understandably focused on universal credit. We are creating a welfare system in which it pays to work. It simplifies a complex legacy benefits system that too often thwarted opportunities to work. I was heartened that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle highlighted the huge amounts of great work done by individual work coaches. One thing that most impresses me when I go on visits to jobcentres is the enthusiasm that work coaches have for universal credit, giving them, for the first time in a generation, the tools to provide personalised and tailored support. For the first time, claimants have a named work coach who helps them navigate the support for housing, training and childcare, leaving up to 50% more time for them to find work. In addition, they get the support of universal support partnerships, which responds

in real time. This contrasts with the legacy benefits, which were hugely complex, with six different benefits across three different agencies: Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, DWP and local authorities. We saw from our own pieces of casework just how some of the most vulnerable people fell through the system. It is estimated that £2.4 billion of financial support was left unclaimed a year.

Chris Bryant: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I will not take interventions just yet, as I need to make a bit more progress. A total of 700,000 of some of the most vulnerable claimants have missed out, on average, on £230 a month. These are some of the people where £5 either way makes a real difference. We have removed the 90% tax rate for some, and the hated 16, 24 and 36-hour cliff edges.

However, it is right to say that improvements are needed. Many of the Members who have spoken powerfully today have helped to change universal credit since its inception. There is still much more to do, but we all welcome the additional £4.5 billion-worth of investment into universal credit set out over the last two Budgets, which means that we will be spending £2 billion more on universal credit than under the legacy benefits.

Chris Bryant rose—

Justin Tomlinson: I will give way shortly.

We have seen changes to advanced payments. We introduced the two-week run-on for housing benefit for existing claimants and, in April 2020, an additional two weeks for ESA, JSA and income support claimants as they migrate over. We have scrapped the seven waiting days. Rightly, the Secretary of State is putting a real focus on looking at alternate payments, whether that is paying direct to the landlord or paying more frequently. We have increased the work allowance by £1,000, worth £630. We have extended the exemption for the minimum income floor for the self-employed. We are continuing to listen to these debates to make further improvements.

Chris Bryant: I have constituents who were housed by Rhondda Housing Association. They were on the old benefits, but because they have been moved by the housing association to new properties, still with the same housing association, they have been moved by the DWP on to universal credit and have to start from the very beginning. The bulk payment system and the payment directly to the housing association means that they have lost out on 11 weeks of housing benefit and, consequently, are suddenly in arrears having done nothing wrong. Will the Minister please make sure that this is put right for my constituents?

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—we have to make the transition as smooth as possible, where possible sharing data and working with support organisations.

That brings me neatly—this is why I was right to take the hon. Gentleman's intervention at that point—on to the key point. Many of the people who will be in the benefits system are incredibly vulnerable. They do not have the family support—the network—that can help them to deal with life's challenges as they come towards them. My ministerial colleagues and I work closely with charities, stakeholders, Members from all parties, and

[Justin Tomlinson]

the Work and Pensions Committee. We also work with those with genuine, real-life experience, because they will not only raise, with their experiences, what needs to be improved, but can help with the training and guidance of our frontline staff.

Maria Eagle: I know this is a small point in the overall scheme of universal credit, but I mentioned my constituent Antony Hamilton and the issue he has in doing his A-levels while being a bit older because of his special educational needs. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether anything could be done to help Antony.

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Lady made a powerful point about Antony, and the relevant Minister will contact her to discuss it further.

The key for us is partnership working. On domestic abuse, we are rightly working with Women's Aid and Refuge to help with training and guidance, and to strengthen our ability to identify, refer and support. We are working with organisations such as Barnardo's and the Children's Society to strengthen opportunities for care leavers. Ex-offenders are working closely with the Ministry of Justice to make sure that their universal credit claim is in place before they leave prison so that no people are falling between the gaps. On homelessness and rough sleeping, we are working with a number of organisations. Only today, Crisis said that over the past two years the Government have been showing drive and energy.

Liam Byrne *rose*—

Justin Tomlinson: I am sorry but I do not have time to give way. The duty to refer change that was brought in in October will be addressing the points that the right hon. Gentleman made.

This party is committed to supporting the most vulnerable. Household incomes have never been higher. Income inequality has fallen. Risks of low income and material deprivation for children and pensioners have never been lower. The incomes of the poorest fifth are up by £400 in real terms, with 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty. We are now spending £50 billion a year in supporting those with disabilities and long-term health conditions—£4 billion higher than in 2010. We, as a Government, are determined to help the most vulnerable. This is what drives me and many Members across the House who are here today. This Government are determined to get it right for the people who need the most support.

6.58 pm

Ruth George: I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and all those who have made powerful speeches. Members across the House raised the issue of PIP appeals and the impact of some terrible cases. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) talked about the five-week wait. The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), raised the benefits freeze, which came on top of a three-year freeze to tax credits and the three-year 1% cap introduced under the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Act 2013. That must be a priority.

I was pleased to hear from the Minister that the Government are looking to do more. My colleagues on the Select Committee are working on two reports on natural migration to universal credit and the welfare safety net. I hope the Government will read and respond to those, as well as the report being compiled by the all-party group on the many issues that remain with universal credit, many of which do not require additional funding but, if solved, will help people to be supported by a personalised system.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

7 pm

The Deputy Speaker put the deferred Questions (Standing Order No. 54).

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE 2018-19

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019, for expenditure by the Department for Education:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £13,388,055,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1966,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £4,460,127,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £4,775,855,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATE 2018-19

DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS

Question put,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £880,517,000 be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1966,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £170,914,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £1,334,611,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 52.

Division No. 338]

[7 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Benyon, rh Richard
Afolami, Bim	Beresford, Sir Paul
Afriyie, Adam	Berry, Jake
Aldous, Peter	Blackman, Bob
Amess, Sir David	Blunt, Crispin
Andrew, Stuart	Boles, Nick
Argar, Edward	Bone, Mr Peter
Atkins, Victoria	Bowie, Andrew
Bacon, Mr Richard	Bradley, Ben
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi	Bradley, rh Karen
Baker, Mr Steve	Brady, Sir Graham
Baldwin, Harriett	Braverman, Suella
Barclay, rh Stephen	Brereton, Jack
Baron, Mr John	Bridgen, Andrew
Bebb, Guto	Brine, Steve
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Brokenshire, rh James

Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Mims
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 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
 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
 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
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 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
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Little Pngelly, Emma
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim

Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 Maynard, Paul
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, rh Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette

Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 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
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Wendy Morton and
Craig Whittaker

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Bardell, Hannah
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan

Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cherry, Joanna
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Davey, rh Sir Edward
 Day, Martyn

Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Farron, Tim
 George, Ruth
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Hendry, Drew
 Hermon, Lady
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hosie, Stewart
 Jardine, Christine
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Law, Chris
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lucas, Caroline
 MacNeil, Angus Brendan

Mc Nally, John
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 Monaghan, Carol
 Moran, Layla
 Newlands, Gavin
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Stephens, Chris
 Stone, Jamie
 Swinson, Jo
 Thewliss, Alison
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes:
Marion Fellows and
David Linden

Question accordingly agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Estimates (Standing Order No.55).

ESTIMATES 2019–20 (NAVY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2020, a number not exceeding 37,200 all ranks be maintained for Naval and Marine Service and that numbers in the Reserve Naval and Marines Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4, and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2019-20, HC 1852.—(*Mike Freer.*)

ESTIMATES 2019–20 (ARMY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2020, a number not exceeding 106,880 all ranks be maintained for Army Service and that numbers in the Reserve Land Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2019-20, HC 1852.—(*Mike Freer.*)

ESTIMATES 2019–20 (AIR) VOTE A

Resolved,

That, during the year ending with 31 March 2020, a number not exceeding 35,090 all ranks be maintained for Air Force Service and that numbers in the Reserve Air Forces be authorised for the purposes of Parts 1, 3, 4 and 5 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 up to the maximum numbers set out in Votes A 2019-20, HC 1852.—(*Mike Freer.*)

ESTIMATES, EXCESSES, 2017–18

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2018—

(1) resources, not exceeding £665,000, be authorised to make good excesses for use for current purposes as set out in Statement of Excesses 2017–18, HC 1968.—(*Mike Freer.*)

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES 2018–19

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2019:

(1) the resources authorised for use for current purposes be reduced by £41,247,306,000, in accordance with HC 1930, HC 1947, HC 1959, HC 1963 and HC 1966,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,008,805,000 be authorised for use for capital purposes, as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £3,294,522,000, be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Mike Freer.*)

ESTIMATES, VOTE ON ACCOUNT 2019–20

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2020:

(1) resources, not exceeding £242,111,176,000 be authorised, on account, for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1946, HC 1950, HC 1960, HC 1964, HC 1965 and HC 1967, 10 Tuesday 26 February 2019 OP No.257: Part 1 Business Today: Chamber

(2) resources, not exceeding £39,226,098,000 be authorised, on account, for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a sum, not exceeding £234,874,322,000 be granted to Her Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Mike Freer.*)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Elizabeth Truss, John Glen, Robert Jenrick and Mel Stride bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) (No. 2) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Mel Stride accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the years ending with 31 March 2018, 31 March 2019 and 31 March 2020; to authorise the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund for the years ending 31 March 2019 and 31 March 2020; and to appropriate the supply authorised by this Act for the years ending with 31 March 2018 and 31 March 2019.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 343).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, proceedings on (a) the motion in the name of Secretary Sajid Javid relating to Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism and (b) the Second Reading of the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [Lords] may be entered upon, though opposed, at any hour; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Mike Freer.*)

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. May I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington) for the preparation of papers relating to the impact of no deal on the United Kingdom? The summary is accurate. I say that because, on Privy Council terms, he allowed me to go through a large number of papers that go into the detail from which there is this summary. However, it is the detail, Mr Deputy Speaker, that fully explains the impact of a no-deal Brexit, leading the Brexit Secretary to comment that it would be ruinous for this country. The guidance I seek from you is how I now obtain the publication of that detail in such a form that right hon. and hon. Members can read it, in the same way that the Government allowed us to read the impact assessments?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): The right hon. Lady has certainly put that point on the record. I am sorry she feels that she has been slightly short-changed with regard to what she thought would be available. What is allowed to be seen is not a point for the Chair, but what I would say is that there are Ministers here. I would expect them to take on board her request and I know well that she will certainly pursue it, other than on this point of order, to make sure the papers she feels should be shown are accessible to all Members. Her point is well made and I am sure people can now reflect on it.

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

7.17 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I beg to move,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 25 February, be approved.

The UK has often felt the sharp pain of terrorism in recent years. Tragically, British families have lost loved ones in Manchester and London, in Tunisia, in France and in Spain. As Home Secretary, I am determined to do all I can to stop this happening again, to protect the lives and liberty of our citizens wherever they are in the world and to preserve the international rule of law.

Proscription is a vital tool to help us to disrupt terrorist networks and those who support them. The loss of 30 British lives in Sousse in 2015 shows the importance of international co-operation. Terrorism is a global threat and we must work closely with other countries to tackle it. We cannot and we will not ignore acts of terror that are committed overseas. To do so would make us all less secure. We must send a strong message to our citizens and the world that we will never condone terrorism, and that the warped ideologies of these ruthless groups have absolutely no place in our society.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome this order from the Home Secretary, who is standing up for what is morally right for our country and standing up against terrorism. The banning of Hezbollah is not before time. What happens if these groups rebadge themselves under a different name, and what action would he take?

Sajid Javid: I welcome my right hon. Friend's support. To answer his question, that is something that we monitor with the help of Home Office officials. If that does happen, we will bring a relevant order to Parliament, as we did recently with another terrorist group that had previously been proscribed. It is something that we try to stay on top of and make sure that there is no way for these terrorist groups to dodge proscription by the UK Government.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sajid Javid: I give way to the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley).

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the Secretary of State on the motion that he is bringing to the House tonight. Of course, Members on this Bench need no lecture about the history of Irish terrorism. We have three plaques to Members who were murdered from Northern Ireland or by Irish terrorists. However, with regards to the specific action tonight, will the Secretary of State be prepared to extend this motion to include members of the Muslim Brotherhood?

Sajid Javid: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that a number of groups are already proscribed—well over 70—including, of course, a number of terrorist groups related to Northern Ireland terrorism. He mentioned a specific group. All I would say is that we keep the whole

[Sajid Javid]

area of terrorism and groups, and which ones are active, under review. Should we feel that we need to come back to Parliament with a further order, we would not hesitate in doing that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sajid Javid: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy).

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I congratulate the Home Secretary on this excellent move. Let us be clear about Hezbollah: it is a group that promotes Jew hate. It promotes murder and it will never, in any circumstances, recognise the only democratic state in the middle east. In that context, does my right hon. Friend share my surprise and confusion over why the Opposition Front Benchers cannot support the proscription of a group that promotes murder and racism?

Sajid Javid: I very much understand everything that my hon. Friend said, and I obviously cannot speak for the views of the official Opposition. They will get an opportunity in a moment to set out their views, and the public will be able to draw their own conclusions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sajid Javid: I will give way one more time, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), then I will make some progress and give way again later.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I strongly commend my right hon. Friend and praise him for the action that he is taking this evening. He spoke about the powerful message that this sends about this Government's view on terrorism, but does he agree that this is not just about sending the important message that there is no safe space for terror groups on British soil, but about the practical impact of the measure in front of us tonight, which is to shut down fundraising activities and ensure that support for terror in this country is closed down?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The whole point of proscription, why it was set out in the Terrorism Act 2000—since then, successive Governments have come to this Dispatch Box and recommended that a number of organisations be proscribed—and this process is that it has real practical action on the ground, for example, not just to stop people being members of the organisations that are proscribed, but to stop them supporting them in any way, including giving them any kind of publicity or oxygen for their vile means.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sajid Javid: I will make some progress and give way in a moment.

This is why I am laying this order to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety and crack down on several other terror organisations. Subject to the will of Parliament, this order will make membership of any part of Hezbollah a criminal offence in the UK. It will give police the power to tackle those who fly its gun-emblazoned flag on our streets, inflaming community tensions. It will give us

more power to disrupt the activity of an organisation who are committed to armed combat, who violently oppose the Israeli people, who destabilised a fragile middle east, who helped to prolong the brutal Syrian conflict, and whose attacks have reached into Europe. We will not hesitate to proscribe groups where they pose a terrorist threat.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I strongly support the decision that my right hon. Friend has taken. The statement that I have seen from the Opposition makes a distinction between the political and military wings of Hezbollah and demands proof that the so-called political wing falls foul of proscription criteria. Will he confirm that Hezbollah itself makes no such distinction, which is entirely plastic and artificial? They are one and the same.

Sajid Javid: I shall come to my hon. Friend's important point in a moment. It is fair to say that Hezbollah itself laughs at that distinction—it mocks it. It does not understand why some countries continue to make this artificial distinction. My hon. Friend has raised an important point.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I congratulate the Home Secretary on this decision. Does he agree with me that it is one thing to engage with terrorists in an attempt to get them to renounce violence and pursue entirely political aims, and quite another to engage with them to show solidarity with them and support for them? Does he agree that, on occasions such as this, hon. Members who have done that in the past should take every opportunity they can to apologise, not hide?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman, whom I thank for his support for the order and his passionate words. He is absolutely right: if there are hon. Members—perhaps there are—who in the past have thought of Hezbollah in a positive light, today is a fresh opportunity for them to demonstrate that they stand against terrorism in all its forms, whether Hezbollah or any of the other organisations that I will be proscribing today.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Is it not the truth that there is not the slightest shred of evidence, after decades of European and British contact, that Hezbollah has in any way moderated? It is still one, official group.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the evidence, some of which I will come to in respect of the groups we are recommending for proscription today. It is quite clear from open source reporting that Hezbollah has been involved, for example, on the side of the Syrian regime in the Syrian conflict. That has led to countless deaths, and it continues to do so in that most horrid conflict.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sajid Javid: I want to make some progress; I will give way in a moment.

The proscription order before the House today is the 23rd under the Terrorism Act 2000. If agreed by the House and the other place, it will ban three groups that I deem a threat to this country. First, there is Hezbollah,

also known as “the party of God”. The order extends the proscription of Hezbollah’s military wing to cover the group in its entirety. There have long been calls to ban the whole group, with the distinction between the two factions derided as smoke and mirrors. Hezbollah itself has laughed off the suggestion that there is a difference. I have carefully considered the evidence and I am satisfied that they are one and the same, with the entire organisation being linked to terrorism.

As I am sure hon. Members are aware, Hezbollah is committed to armed resistance to the state of Israel. It has the largest non-state military force in Lebanon. As the House will appreciate, I cannot go into the details of current intelligence, but I can say that Hezbollah has been reported in many open sources as being linked to or claiming responsibility for many atrocities. These include a suicide bomb attack on a Buenos Aires Jewish community centre in 1994 that left 85 people dead and hundreds injured. The bloodshed came just two years after an attack on the Israeli embassy in that same city, which killed 29 people. Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian war since 2012 continues to prolong the conflict and the brutal repression of the Syrian people. In 2016, it helped besiege Aleppo, stopping humanitarian aid reaching parts of the city for six months, putting thousands at risk of mass starvation. Its actions continue to destabilise the fragile middle east.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend how pleased my constituents are tonight as they hear this news? May I ask him to confirm that at the annual Al-Quds rally we will not see the flags of this antisemitic organisation continue to be paraded on the streets of London?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his words. What I can confirm is that if this order is passed by Parliament tonight, it will be a criminal offence for anyone, in public, to wear any clothing or carry any articles, including flags, which will arouse reasonable suspicion that an individual is a member or a supporter of a proscribed organisation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the Home Secretary on overcoming the nonsense about there being separate military and political wings. Hezbollah itself has said:

“We don’t have a military wing and a political one; we don’t have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other...Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members...is in the service of the resistance”.

I congratulate the Home Secretary on laying this order tonight.

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend. Again, he has highlighted the fallacy about different wings in an organisation which has only one wing, and that is a wing of terrorism.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Al-Muqawama—the resistance in Lebanon—is indeed entirely part of the single organisation. Does he agree, however, that what this organisation has done, with the backing of Iran in Syria—and not just in areas of the middle east but with Syrian support in places such as Argentina, which he has already cited—is spread antisemitism, and spread

the repression of ideas and liberty, all over the world? This is an act of resistance that my right hon. Friend is right to take in the UK, but he is also joining the Dutch and other European countries that have taken this action already. Will he encourage more countries to follow suit?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. As he says, other countries have taken the action that we are proposing, and I shall mention a couple of them in a moment. However, I hope that others, including our allies across the world, are listening, and that those that still maintain the distinction between a military and a political wing will listen carefully and perhaps be encouraged to take the action that we are taking.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I build on that point? The Home Secretary will recognise the importance of the Five Eyes organisation. I know that the United States and Canada have already made the decision that we are making tonight, but there is still work to be done with our allies in Australia and New Zealand. Will the Home Secretary engage specifically with our Five Eyes partners to ensure that there is a uniform approach and a collective will to fight against Hezbollah?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned our closest allies when it comes to matters of security and intelligence. He will know that there is a strong and regular dialogue and conversation with all our friends in the Five Eyes alliance. I hope that those that have not proscribed Hezbollah fully are listening carefully. I intend to raise the matter in the Five Country Ministerial, which I will chair and host in the UK later this year.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s announcement and commend him for his clear leadership and decisive action on this matter, which is long overdue. Does he agree that that action sends a clear message to the Jewish communities throughout our country that there is no place in this nation for antisemitism and antisemitic organisations?

Sajid Javid: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Sadly, as I mentioned earlier, Hezbollah has identified as one of its biggest targets the state of Israel and its people. It has long had a hatred of people who are of the Jewish faith. That is, of course, absolutely unacceptable, and we hope that today’s action will not just send a strong signal, but will help by denigrating this group and making it weaker in terms of support from anyone who might be based in the UK. We hope that it will help to protect our friends in Israel, and give comfort to Jews across the world.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sajid Javid: I will make some progress, but I will give way in a moment.

The extent of Hezbollah’s entire involvement in terror has long been debated in this House. The UK Government first proscribed Hezbollah’s external security organisation in 2001. In 2008 this was extended to include the entire military wing, the so-called Jihad council, and all units operating under it. We took that further by designating

[Sajid Javid]

Hezbollah's military wing under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010, and the European Union followed suit in 2013 after six people were murdered in the Bulgarian bus attack. The USA, Canada, the Netherlands, Bahrain and the Gulf Co-operation Council already proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organisation.

This Government have continued to call on Hezbollah to end its armed status; it has not listened. Indeed, its behaviour has escalated; the distinction between its political and military wings is now untenable. It is right that we act now to proscribe this entire organisation.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): If we have learned anything from the new Labour years it is that proscribing clerics or individual organisations in and of themselves is not enough; it should be part of a wider strategy with allies. So given that we have just had the joint EU-Arab League summit, how many of our allies at that summit intend to follow the Government's lead?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct that just proscribing a terrorist group is of course not enough; it is part of the toolbox or toolkit that we have to fight terrorism, and there are many other tools we can employ. For example, measures are taken through legislation, such as the recent Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, to try in other ways to fight terrorism.

The hon. Gentleman asked what other countries, especially at the recent summit, may have followed suit: as I mentioned, the Gulf Co-operation Council, which has many members, has long proscribed Hezbollah in its entirety, and Bahrain has proscribed Hezbollah as well. And I am sure that through today's action many countries will be interested to know how and why we are taking this action, and we work closely with allies so perhaps they will follow suit.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's decision on Hezbollah, but does he agree that we need to redouble our efforts to cut off sources of financial supply to groups like Hezbollah, which are to do with money laundering and so on, by working with our allies like the US?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, and that is why for example under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 we have taken action against Hezbollah and other proscribed terrorist organisations, and we are always looking to see what more we can do in terms of going after assets and those who help with fundraising. We try to do this work together with our allies, which gives us a much greater chance of success in cutting off financing.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is only 13 months since our right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime was in this House having a rather more difficult time of making the opposite arguments around the proscription of this organisation, and I would be extremely interested to know what has changed in the course of the last 13 months, other than my right hon. Friend becoming Secretary of State, for the Government to change their position.

Sajid Javid: That is a good question, and my hon. Friend knows that we will keep under constant review the different terrorist organisations and groups, particularly ones we have proscribed some part of before, and we would look at both secret intelligence and there would be more open source information. For example, my hon. Friend asks what has changed: in terms of open source information it is evident that Hezbollah has got more involved in and drawn into the Syrian conflict, and is responsible for the death and injury of countless innocent civilians.

We will also look at advice from officials. There is a proscription group of officials made up from across Government Departments, not just from the Home Office, but including for example the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and we would listen to their excellent advice. They have made it very clear that Hezbollah is clearly a candidate for proscription because it meets all the tests set out in the Terrorism Act 2000.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for his detailed answer to the question from the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) about what has changed. In terms of the political changes, is his decision related to the problems of Government formation in Lebanon, where Hezbollah Ministers are having problems trying to form a Government with the Prime Minister? Has that been part of the right hon. Gentleman's decision making?

Sajid Javid: The short answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question is no. For a number of years, the UK Government have had a long-standing policy of no contact with Hezbollah and, in a way, that has made this decision more straightforward in terms of any potential impact on Lebanon. Our ties with the Lebanese Government and our support for Lebanon through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development are strong. There has been a need to ensure that those arrangements are compliant with this order, but they remain largely untouched and our relationship with the legitimate Government of Lebanon will remain.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the decision that he is taking and bringing to the House. My Jewish constituents will warmly welcome the decision, but actually, so will the Christian refugees from Lebanon who have also been targeted and attacked by Hezbollah. We should not forget those individuals. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) mentioned the al-Quds marches in this country. One of the challenges for the police is that they say they cannot interfere because people claim that the Hezbollah flags they are carrying relate to the political wing of the group. Will my right hon. Friend's decision ensure that the police will be able to take action against the people parading those flags? Will he also ensure that we freeze all the assets of Hezbollah in the UK and encourage our allies to do the same?

Sajid Javid: To answer my hon. Friend's last question first, we have already taken steps to freeze the assets of terrorist groups, and we will continue to ensure that that always remains the case. On his first point, he is right to point out that Hezbollah's victims have been of many

different faiths. There have been Jewish and Christian victims, and many Muslims have been murdered by Hezbollah as well. When it comes to displaying flags, clothing or any item that might be connected with Hezbollah or any other proscribed terrorist organisation, that will be a criminal offence from now on. This will give the police and the Crown Prosecution Service the ability to act in a way that they have been prevented from doing up to now.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): When the House debated this issue a few months ago, every Back Bencher advocated the full proscription of Hezbollah and it was deeply regrettable that, at that stage, neither Front Bench did so. I welcome the Government's change of heart, but does my right hon. Friend share my deep regret that it is not shared by those on the Opposition Front Bench?

Sajid Javid: I welcome my right hon. Friend's support, but I will reserve my judgment on the Opposition. I will wait to hear the shadow Minister's thoughts. However, some Members might already have seen a press release from the official Opposition which suggests that they are against the proscription of Hezbollah. I am sure that is actually not the case, and that the shadow Minister will tell us that that must be some kind of typo and that they are absolutely committed to fighting terrorism because they know that that is what the British people want. In that regard, it would be wise for the Opposition to note that ever since the Terrorism Act 2000, no proscription order that has been brought to this Dispatch Box by any Government, Labour or Conservative, has ever been opposed by the official Opposition. They have supported the banning of every organisation that has been suggested. If it actually turns out that the Labour party objects to the banning of Hezbollah, that will be a first in this Parliament, and the British people will judge that for themselves.

Secondly, the order will proscribe Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, which is also known as JNIM, its aliases Nusrat al-Islam and Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen and its media arm, known as az-Zallaqa. JNIM was established in March 2017 as a federation of al-Qaeda aligned groups in Mali. It aims to eradicate government and the western presence from the western Sahel region, including parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In their place, it wants to impose a strict Salafist interpretation of sharia law. To that end, it attacks western interests across the region and kidnaps western nationals to raise ransom money. Three civilians and two military personnel were killed in a 2017 attack on a tourist hotspot in Mali. Az-Zallaqa then proudly announces the atrocities and claims responsibility. JNIM is already designated by the US and the UN, and I have no hesitation in doing the same.

Finally, the order will ban Ansaroul Islam and its alias Ansaroul Islam Lil Irchad Wal Jihad. The group wants to take control of the Fulani kingdom of Djelgoodji in Burkina Faso and Mali and to impose its own strict interpretation of sharia law. It announced its existence in 2016 by claiming responsibility for an attack on an army outpost in Burkina Faso that killed at least 12 soldiers. Its methods include attacks on police stations, schools and public officials. The predominantly Fulani organisation often targets other ethnic groups, leading to mass displacement. Ansaroul Islam is already designated as a

terror group by the US, and it is highly likely that it is supported by JNIM. Given its murderous actions, it is only right that we outlaw it in the UK.

Sir Edward Davey: The Home Secretary is right to proscribe the two organisations operating in Africa, but is he aware that Lord Anderson of Ipswich, the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, said that "at least 14 of the 74 organisations proscribed... are not concerned in terrorism and therefore do not meet the minimum statutory condition for proscription."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 17 December 2018; Vol. 794, c. 1642.]

and did the Home Secretary consider de-proscribing organisations that no longer meet that criterion?

Sajid Javid: As I mentioned earlier, we keep under review not just which organisations need to be proscribed, but which organisations may need to be removed. Organisations have been removed in the past, and organisations are not added every year, but we keep the matter constantly under review.

I have no doubt all three proscriptions are in the national interest. Under section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000, I have the power to proscribe an organisation if I believe it is concerned in terrorism. Currently, 74 international terrorist organisations are proscribed under the Act, alongside 14 connected to Northern Ireland that are proscribed under separate legislation. I only exercise the power after thoroughly reviewing all the available evidence. I consult colleagues across Government, intelligence agencies and law enforcement, and the cross-Government proscription review group supports me in the decision-making process.

Once proscribed, an organisation is outlawed and unable to operate in the UK. It becomes a criminal offence to be a member, to support it or to encourage the support of others. Proscription makes it harder for a banned group to fundraise and recruit, and its assets can become subject to seizure as terrorist property. Those linked to such groups may be excluded from the UK using immigration powers. Once a group is proscribed, it is also an offence to display its symbols in public and to brandish them on flags and clothes to indicate or encourage support. Earlier this month, Parliament passed the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, which strengthens these powers by also making it an offence to publish an image of such an item and extends extra-territorial jurisdiction so that UK nationals and residents can be prosecuted in our courts for doing so overseas. This will help us further bear down on online propaganda and terrorist grooming, enabling us to act when a foreign fighter uses social media to reach back to the UK to build support for their terrorist organisation.

I take this opportunity to update the House on another order, which I laid yesterday. The order came into effect today and it outlaws aliases of two already proscribed organisations: Daesh and the Revolutionary People's Liberation party. We will not allow these or any other groups to continue to operate merely by changing their name. Banning these aliases will leave those groups with nowhere left to hide.

I have outlined the terrorist threat posed by these groups. To ignore this would be to fail in our duty to protect our citizens and our allies. It can only be right that we add them to the list of proscribed organisations. The time has come to act, and I will not flinch from

[Sajid Javid]

doing do. Subject to the agreement of this House and the other place, the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2019 will come into effect on Friday 1 March.

7.50 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for his remarks, and I thank him for the letter he sent to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), the shadow Home Secretary, setting out his decision. I welcome his remarks about the banning of aliases in addition to principal names.

I make it clear from the outset that the Opposition will not be opposing the motion before the House tonight but, as I am sure the Home Secretary would appreciate and fully expect, I will be scrutinising his decisions. Section 3(5) of the Terrorism Act 2000 sets out the parameters of what is deemed to be an organisation concerned in terrorism, which are that it

“commits or participates in acts of terrorism, prepares for terrorism, promotes or encourages terrorism, or is otherwise concerned in terrorism.”

I will touch briefly on each of the organisations mentioned by the Home Secretary.

First, from the information provided by the Home Secretary, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin—otherwise referred to as JNIM—was established in March 2017 as a federation of al-Qaeda-aligned groups and has operations in northern and central Mali, northern Burkina Faso and western Niger. It has claimed responsibility, as he set out, for a number of atrocities from 18 June 2017 to 29 June 2018.

Secondly, Ansaroul Islam announced its existence in December 2016, and its overarching aim is to establish dominance in northern Burkina Faso and central Mali. It has claimed responsibility for an appalling attack on an army outpost in Burkina Faso that killed at least 12 soldiers. The Home Secretary was clear in his letter that Ansaroul Islam seeks to eradicate the Burkinabe state presence from Burkina Faso’s northern regions.

Thirdly, the Home Secretary has indicated that Hezbollah will now be proscribed in its entirety. Indeed, he gave a brief history. The then Labour Government proscribed its external security organisation in 2001, and its military apparatus was proscribed in 2008.

The Home Secretary rightly said that these orders have never been opposed by any Opposition, and the order will not be opposed tonight. I told the House last year:

“The Opposition absolutely condemn the violence, and we continue to support the proscription of the military wing of Hezbollah, which has been the Government’s position.”—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 506.]

I was clear in that condemnation then, and I am again now.

Theresa Villiers: Does the Labour Front Bench support the proscription of Hezbollah in its entirety?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have just set out the position: we are not opposing the motion. What I am seeking to do is to scrutinise the Government’s position, which is perfectly reasonable.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will make some progress, but I will come back to the right hon. Lady.

The Home Secretary stated in his letter to the shadow Home Secretary:

“Hizballah, as a political entity in Lebanon has won votes in legitimate elections and forms part of the Lebanese Government. It has the largest non-state military force in the country.”

In last January’s debate, the Security Minister said:

“We believe that the best way to weaken Hezbollah in the region and further afield is to have a strong state of Lebanon. The stronger the state of Lebanon, which represents multi-faith groups, has a democracy and Speakers of Parliament and recognises the individual religious minorities in the country, the weaker Hezbollah will be. It is not in our interests to have a weak, fractured Lebanon.”—[*Official Report*, 25 January 2018; Vol. 635, c. 512.]

He is of course correct about that.

I totally appreciate the strong views on this matter, and it has previously been the view of the Foreign Office for many years that the proscription of the political wing, which is part of the elected Lebanese Government, would make it difficult to maintain normal diplomatic relations with Lebanon or to work with the Government there on humanitarian issues, including those facing Syrian refugees in part of the country controlled by Hezbollah. The Home Secretary said in his remarks about ongoing diplomatic engagement with the Government of Lebanon that he would be looking at whether it is compliant with the order. I would appreciate him setting out in more detail how that engagement is to continue.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): I just wanted to say to Opposition Front Benchers that British officials can still meet their Lebanese counterparts. As the Home Secretary will perhaps confirm a little later, the explanatory notes to the Terrorism Act 2000 clarify that the arrangement of “genuinely benign meetings” with proscribed groups is permitted. Such meetings are interpreted as those at which the terrorist activities of the group are not promoted or encouraged, for example, a meeting designed to encourage a designated group to engage in a peace process. I think that covers the point that the hon. Gentleman has just made.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very grateful for the intervention and I am sure the Home Secretary will come back to that in due course. The reason I raised the issue of proscription—

Robert Halfon *rose*—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will finish the point and then come back to the right hon. Gentleman.

We have to make decisions based on clear evidence. I raise that because of course it is for the Home Secretary, on this as with any other proscription decisions of any Government, to demonstrate that their objective, impartial decision is driven by new and clear evidence. I am sure he will be keen to set out that evidence to the House. May I just return to the point made by the by the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan)? The Security Minister was very clear when we debated this 13 months ago that his concern was that full proscription

could lead to a weak and fractured Lebanon. Clearly that cannot be the assessment of the Home Secretary now and it would be useful for the whole House if he were to set out why he thinks that judgment of the Security Minister has changed from last year.

Robert Halfon *rose*—

Dr Offord *rose*—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I promised the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) that I would give way to him.

Robert Halfon: Let me just quote what the “Labour spokesman” said, according to today’s newspapers:

“Ministers have not yet provided any clear evidence to suggest” that there should be a change to proscribing Hezbollah. They then go on to say:

“Decisions on the proscription of organisations as terror groups are supposed to be made on the advice of civil servants based on clear evidence that those organisations fall foul...The Home Secretary must therefore now demonstrate that this decision was taken in an objective and impartial way, and driven by clear and new evidence, not by his leadership ambitions.”

Is that not the wrong way to treat something as serious as this, by turning it into something about party politics? Given that the hon. Gentleman has heard the evidence in the opening speech by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, surely he should get up at the Dispatch Box to say that we are right to ban this terrorist organisation from our country.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that I am simply asking what has changed, which is not an unreasonable question. Much of the evidence that has been put forward today we heard 13 months ago, and very concerning it is too. However, I am just asking the direct question: what has changed? I do not see it as unreasonable to provide scrutiny of the decision being taken. I will be clear to the Home Secretary—

Dr Offord *rose*—

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am going to complete this. Throughout my time in this role, I have worked with the Government. I worked with them on the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, and I think that our working together has enhanced the security of our citizens. What I am doing here at the Dispatch Box today is to scrutinise this decision carefully and hold the Home Secretary to account, which I believe is the role of a responsible Opposition. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Oh, I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon. My goodness, I thought he was giving way but I am very pleased that he has concluded. There will be a limit on Back-Bench speeches of three minutes.

7.59 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I will be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker, not least because all the main arguments and points have been covered. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary was incredibly generous in taking interventions and we have had a

good debate and discussion so far. I shall also be brief because you have asked us to be, Madam Deputy Speaker, and that is the rule under which we are operating this evening.

I join everyone else in praising the Home Secretary for the action he is taking. It is typically strong and clear-sighted of him and it is a powerful demonstration of the values that he brings to the important office that he holds. It is also an important demonstration of the Government’s values in action. The Home Secretary has worked closely with the Foreign Secretary and other ministerial colleagues to bring us to this point.

I listened with great interest to the remarks from the Opposition Front Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), whom I know well. He is intelligent and fair-minded, but I was concerned because, although he is absolutely right that he has a duty to scrutinise, to ask the difficult questions and to ask about the evidence, we did not hear from him a message saying that the Opposition support the action that we are about to take to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety. It is one thing to say, “We’re not going to oppose it because these measures are never opposed by the Opposition,” and to say, “We have a duty to scrutinise,” but we want to hear from the Opposition that they actively support this important measure.

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary covered in some detail the history of the proscription of Hezbollah, its military operations and military wing. Numerous colleagues have made the point that many Government Members, and some Opposition Members, never regarded the distinction between a military wing of Hezbollah and a civilian wing as being anything other than an artificial construct, so we strongly welcome the decision that has finally been taken to ban Hezbollah in its entirety.

The Home Secretary said earlier that Hezbollah laughs at us when we in this House and in the Government try to make the point that there is some distinction. As Hezbollah’s deputy secretary-general Sheikh Naim Qassem himself stated in October 2012:

“We don’t have a military wing and a political one; we don’t have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other...Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, is in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority.”

Members will know exactly what Hezbollah means when it talks about resistance: it means Jew hating and Israel hating. Tonight, the Government and this House are taking action to ban Hezbollah in its entirety and to stand up against that kind of vile rhetoric.

8.2 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is clear that Hezbollah is an organisation that has been intimately involved in terrorist attacks and the killing of civilians, which should of course be met with unequivocal condemnation from the international community and this House. As others have said, in the 2006 war Hezbollah fired thousands of rockets, indiscriminately and at times deliberately, at civilian areas in northern Israel, killing at least 39 civilians, according to Human Rights Watch. In the conflict in Syria, we have seen Hezbollah forces fight alongside Assad’s Syrian Government groups, and we all know the terrible atrocities of which they have been guilty.

[Joanna Cherry]

Of course, these events take place in a growing climate of antisemitism around the world, which the SNP condemns utterly and unequivocally. We entirely condemn the violent actions of Hezbollah in Israel and Syria. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Israel-Palestine situation—many of us, including myself, hold serious concerns about human rights violations in the occupied territories and the Gaza strip—and notwithstanding any concerns, they should never be used as any kind of purported justification for attacks on the people of Israel or Jewish people around the world or, indeed, for abuse against them. The SNP and the Scottish Government have consistently condemned obstacles to progress in the peace process—not only indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israel but the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied territories.

As others have alluded to, there was a detailed debate on the topic of the proscription—the full proscription—of Hezbollah in this House on 25 January last year. I had the benefit of reading that debate earlier today and discussing it with my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) who spoke in it. Very serious concern was raised by Members across the House about the statements and beliefs of Hezbollah as a whole, its antisemitism, and its avowed desire for the destruction of the state of Israel. As I have already said, those concerns are shared by the Scottish National party.

My only purpose in speaking today is to elicit from the Home Secretary precisely what has changed since 25 January last year when the Minister for Security and Economic Crime spoke so eloquently about the history of the proscription of the military wing. He went on to say that, although the proscription of Hezbollah in its entirety was kept under review, the Government at that stage wished to maintain a balance. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend in the debate on 25 January last year, other countries have also sought to maintain that balance, including two members of the Five Eyes and the European Union. In response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), I was not sure that the Home Secretary was able to elicit whether any other countries have changed their position.

As the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) said, it is the role of the Opposition to ask questions and to scrutinise. I am not interested in defending Hezbollah—of course I am not—and I have made my party's condemnation of its activities crystal clear. I simply wish to elicit from the Home Secretary what specifically has led to the Government's change of mind since 25 January 2018 so that I might better understand this decision today. I am also concerned that the Home Secretary should clarify for us what specific arrangements he has put in place to make sure that diplomatic channels are kept open—not with Hezbollah, but with the Lebanese Government and Lebanese parliamentarians—in order to maintain stability in Lebanon. I also seek from the Home Secretary a confirmation, which I am sure that he will give me, of the Government's commitment to use their influence to help revitalise the peace process in the middle east and to find a way to break the terrible political deadlock there and start to move towards bringing an end to the conflict.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am going to do something very unusual. The Front-Bench speakers have taken far less time than I anticipated, so, with apologies to the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), I will raise the time limit to five minutes.

8.7 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): That makes me the lucky recipient, as I am following my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb).

Plainly, how we deal with Hezbollah has been matter of careful consideration for a long time. I do not think that anyone is in any doubt that the previous position—this differentiation between the military and the political wing—was, as has been made crystal clear by a number of contributions here, a piece of constructive ambiguity. It was exactly that. There were, of course, reasons why the Government created that constructive ambiguity. Those considerations that, until now, have dictated the scale of proscription of Hezbollah should not be lost as we go forward.

Hezbollah is, of course, an important part of the Government coalition in the Lebanon. I think that it provides 13 out of the 68 Members of Parliament in the governing coalition. There are important development objectives, particularly in the south of Lebanon where Hezbollah has the core of its support from the poorer Shi'a communities in the Lebanon. Many of those development projects will be delivered with the assistance of the local authorities and the local councils that are elected there. It will be very difficult for officials from the Department for International Development to deliver those projects in the way that they have been if they suddenly find that they have to identify which local officials are flying a Hezbollah badge to get elected, which is largely necessary in that part of Lebanon given Hezbollah's political popularity—that is the case whether we like it or not. Our aid programme to that part of Lebanon is extremely important. In particular, the assistance that we have given to Lebanon in dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis means that it would possibly be damaging to British interests if we allowed this proscription to affect the effective delivery of that assistance.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): The argument that we should not proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety, to help development projects in Lebanon seems a little bit tenuous. Is the hon. Gentleman arguing that to maintain those development projects in Lebanon, we have to allow an organisation to parade on the streets of our capital city with its terrorist symbol of a gun and to intimidate and threaten the Jewish community and others in our country?

Crispin Blunt: No, of course not. I am saying that the considerations that will have led to the United Kingdom's policy until now—until we make this change tonight—ought to be taken into account. Some of the practical implications of trying to deliver much-needed development assistance, particularly in southern Lebanon to assist with the tidal wave of refugees that have come into Lebanon, displaced by the Syrian crisis, will cause complexity in the delivery of those aid programmes.

We need to take that into consideration and we have to work out how we are going to do so. It has nothing to do with waving flags in the United Kingdom. All I am saying is that there were reasons for our policy until today, and I would not want those reasons to be lost in this consideration. We want to make sure that we do not cripple the co-operative schemes where they exist. I have already referred to the programmes in the south of the country and the municipalities that will contain people elected under the Hezbollah party label.

Of course, the stability of Lebanon is also an extremely important consideration. Anyone who pretends that they understand the politics of Lebanon will almost immediately be demonstrated not to understand it. It is immensely difficult to get under the surface of this. Some of that complexity is known to me from the visits I have made to Lebanon. Perhaps the most impressive one was in 2006, immediately in the wake of the Israeli attack on Lebanon and the destruction of much of its infrastructure. The driver who was assigned to me and two other parliamentary colleagues at the time was a Hezbollah supporter, but his drink of choice was vodka and his occupation of choice was clubbing. That does go to suggest that it is not quite the same religiously motivated organisation all the way through.

Hezbollah has been seen by the Lebanese Shi'a population as being their most effective representative. The history of terrorism that has been associated with it means that we are going to pass this measure. However, we have to engage with the practical reality that Hezbollah does have at the moment, regrettable though that may be, a very significant amount of the popular support in Lebanon. We are going to continue to need to find a way to make sure that that popular support is engaged in the stability of Lebanon, which is also a key British interest.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We are back on to four minutes.

8.13 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Home Secretary on bringing this much-needed measure before the House tonight. I am extremely concerned that my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) was unable to give proper, full support to the banning of this terrorist organisation, Hezbollah, in its entirety. Hezbollah is not our friend, and today was a good opportunity to say so.

Terrorism affects our whole society. Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation acting throughout the world. We have heard examples of it causing death and destruction, with the death of 85 people in a community centre in Argentina, and hundreds of thousands of people, including children, killed or facing starvation in Syria because of its activities. I would like to concentrate on the activities of Hezbollah here in this country and ask Members to think about what happens every single year on the streets of London on al-Quds day—the day designated by the late Ayatollah Khomeini to call for the destruction of Israel.

The Hezbollah terrorist flag is flown on the streets of London, because of our current legislation. If the flag, with its upturned rifle, has a sticker on it saying, “We are

supporting the political wing of Hezbollah,” it is able to be flown without challenge. I went to see the Metropolitan police last year after that happened, and they followed up with a letter to me, which said:

“As Parliament has chosen not to proscribe the whole of Hizballah, being a member or supporter of the wider non-proscribed organisation is lawful, and those supporters can rightfully protest”. I was told clearly that if the whole organisation were proscribed, those flags could not be flown. Is the Home Secretary sure that this order does not contain any loopholes that will allow that terrorist flag to be flown on the streets of London? It would be appalling if it could be.

I very much welcome the step that the Home Secretary is taking, and I hope that it will have the full support of all Members. Terrorism is abhorrent. Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation. To suggest that it has two separate wings is a fallacy. It is wrong for Hezbollah to operate, kill and maim people and propagate terrorism throughout the world, and that includes what happens here in this country.

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Lady for standing up for an honourable Labour tradition of opposing terrorism. Is she aware of the opinion poll conducted by ComRes for the *Jewish News* that suggested that something like 80% of the public are in favour of banning Hezbollah?

Dame Louise Ellman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comment. I am aware of that important opinion poll. It is a timely reminder that, while Hezbollah specifically targets Jewish people and Jewish organisations, it affects our whole society. When we consider this issue, we should look at how the terrorist organisation Hezbollah affects our whole society. That is why it is right for the Home Secretary to bring this order before us, and I hope that it is supported by everybody here.

8.17 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The decision to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety is long overdue, and I congratulate the Home Secretary on taking this action. I first called for its proscription after I attended a demonstration outside No. 10, when the Prime Minister of Israel was visiting, and I not only heard antisemitic abuse but saw the flying of the Hezbollah flag. I pointed that out to the gold commander and demonstrated to him that it was a criminal offence under the Terrorism Act 2000. He assured me that he had not only recorded the individuals but that action would be taken later, as his immediate priority was to keep the two factions apart. However, I later found out that the Metropolitan police would not be taking any action because of a Queen's counsel opinion that there are two wings of the party and therefore no offence had been committed.

I have continued to attend the annual alternative al-Quds rally each year, where I have witnessed further acts of intimidation and inflammatory actions by people waving the flag. In addition, I was proud to present to Parliament a petition of 1,000 constituents, and I helped to deliver to No. 10 a petition from the Israel-Britain Alliance, which is run by Michael McCann, calling for the proscription of Hezbollah.

It was a great disappointment back on 25 January last year when Labour Front Benchers and the Government said that they did not wish to go down this route. I am sure that Members will remember that debate and the

[Dr Matthew Offord]

defence given on both sides, but it is worth mentioning the different positions that the Government and the Labour Opposition took. Any Member here who voted against the Terrorism Act 2000, or indeed the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001, is really stretching the bounds of credibility if they come along tonight and say that they actually support this change, when they clearly voted against the legislation.

More importantly, as I am sure many Members will remember—the Home Secretary will not, because he was not Home Secretary at the time—there was the infamous briefing note that Labour Front Benchers gave their Members instructing them not to vote for proscription. The rationale for this was clear: it was, they claimed, a threat to the middle east peace process. The note said:

“Full proscription could be a move against dialogue and meaningful peace negotiations in the Middle East.”

It is worth asking Labour Front Benchers why that position has changed.

I am also concerned with my own Front Benchers, but on this occasion their decision is welcome, and I am not going to question their reasons for doing it. The Government have taken a decision to proscribe Hezbollah in its entirety on the basis that it is no longer tenable to distinguish between the military and the political wings of the organisation, and I welcome that decision. What it actually does is to send out a strong message. By proscribing Hezbollah, the Conservative Government are demonstrating their commitment to anti-extremism and their fight against antisemitism, and it constrains the ability of Hezbollah to operate in the UK. Most of all, it protects community cohesion, and for that, Home Secretary, I salute you.

8.21 pm

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I want to speak very briefly about Hezbollah's role in Yemen and the human catastrophe it is involved in. There is a clear link between Ansar Allah and Hezbollah in that they are both supported and funded by the Iranian Government in this proxy war. Since the war broke out, the Houthis—Ansar Allah—have unseated the legitimate Government, with the help of Hezbollah in training, expertise, weapons and munitions.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah publicly backed the Houthis—Ansar Allah, or the Partisans of God—in a speech on 29 June 2018, saying:

“I, and all my brothers and the resistance in the world...should bow in tribute to those fighters”.

Let us not forget what Ansar Allah's motto is and what it supports:

“Death to America, Death to Israel, A curse upon the Jews”.

Let us be absolutely clear what it stands for. Furthermore, Hezbollah and Ansar Allah met last August in Beirut. The meeting consisted of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and the spokesperson for Ansar Allah—the Partisans of God—Mohammed Abdul Salam.

In this conflict, Hezbollah fighters have been killed on the battlefield in Yemen, and I think this is further testament of its role in this conflict. It is a terrible conflict, which is exacting a huge price on the people of Yemen, and Hezbollah is part of that problem. A lot of

this is coming in from an Iranian ship, Saviz, which is moored in the Bab el-Mandeb straits, and it is supported by the Iranian Government.

I will finish with one conclusion. When the peace talks took place in Stockholm, one of the conditions that Ansar Allah asked for in relation to the prisoner transfer was for the injured Hezbollah fighters to be transferred safely to Oman. That was one of the conditions, and it tells us everything we need to know about Hezbollah's role in the war in Yemen.

8.23 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Ind): May I unequivocally welcome today's announcement from the Home Secretary? I pay tribute to all those in this House and beyond who have worked long and hard to achieve this result. I would like to thank the cross-party Back-Bench coalition that supported me in the debate I led on this topic in January 2018, despite opposition from both Government and Opposition Front Benchers. In particular, I wish to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) for her sterling efforts to ensure proscription and end the annual travesty of the flags of an antisemitic terror group being paraded on the streets of London.

As the Community Security Trust rightly argued last year, the artificial division between Hezbollah's so-called military and political wings, one that Hezbollah itself denies, was highly damaging to social cohesion and community relations. It is thus very disappointing, but I am afraid not surprising, to hear the words of the Opposition Front Bencher today. I hear that the Opposition are not opposing the order, but I really think they should be supporting it. However, I thank the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) for the listening ear he gave when we met after last year's debate.

Today's step is not simply a blow against terrorism and antisemitism; it furthers the cause of peace. Let us be clear that Hezbollah has no desire to be part of any meaningful dialogue or peace process in the middle east. Opposition Front Benchers do not need to take my word for it, because Hezbollah has repeatedly and consistently made its aims and intentions very clear. It vehemently opposed the Oslo peace process and has fought any normalisation of relations between Israel and Arab countries. In its founding manifesto in 1985, Hezbollah says of Israel:

“Our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated. We recognise no treaty with it, no cease-fire, and no peace agreements, whether separate or consolidated.”

On numerous occasions, most notably in 1993, 1996 and 2006, Hezbollah has sought to provoke conflicts with Israel, and it is readying itself for war once again. It now has an estimated 120,000 to 150,000 rockets and missiles—an arsenal larger than that of many states—and an army of 45,000 fighters. At the end of last year, in a further violation of UN Security Council resolution 1701, a number of cross-border terror tunnels were discovered. It is all part of Hezbollah's plan of attack, called “Conquering the Galilee”, to launch assaults inside Israeli cities and towns, which Hassan Nasrallah publicly boasted about only last month.

It is not just the people of Israel to whom Hezbollah poses a direct threat; it is heavily implicated in the war crimes of Iran and the Assad regime in Syria, having participated in battles in Aleppo and the killing of more

than 1,000 civilians in the Ghouta district in the eastern suburbs of Damascus. It has destabilised Lebanon, bringing conflict to its people and murdering its political opponents, and it has conspired with its Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps masters to attack western, Israeli and Jewish targets throughout the middle east, Europe and South America.

I know that this is not the direct responsibility of the Home Secretary, but I now urge the Government to do more to work with our allies and friends in the region to counter the pernicious influence of Iran, the barely hidden hand behind Hezbollah and the source of so much of the violence, sectarianism and terror that plagues the middle east.

8.27 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), who has led this campaign and sought to bring this issue to light, and who I think deserves huge credit for the measure before the House tonight. It is very important that the Home Secretary is proscribing Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin. It is important to recognise the impact that JNIM has had, in terrorist actions in Mali, Burkina Faso and elsewhere in the region. We should worry about that, and he is right to proscribe it.

Of course, the debate is about the change being made on Hezbollah. Everyone, I think, across the House is concerned about Hezbollah. It has had 30 years of terrorist attacks. Moreover, we have seen in the rhetoric of its leaders, particularly Hassan Nasrallah, a completely abhorrent antisemitic vein. For example, he has said:

“The Jews are a cancer which is liable to spread at any moment... If they all gather in Israel, it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide.”

It is an organisation that everyone should repudiate.

I therefore think that it is right that the Government have kept the proscription of the political wing of Hezbollah under review and sought to bring this measure to the House tonight. However, like the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), I also think that it is right that we probe the Government on why the change has been made, because Opposition parties have had to listen to the Government and follow them. The Security Minister told the House relatively recently:

“Their military wings are proscribed, but as Hezbollah forms part of the Government in Lebanon and Hamas plays an active role in its part of the region as a member of a Government, the proscription applies only to the military wing.”—[*Official Report*, 19 December 2017; Vol. 633, c. 1008.]

When I intervened—other Members have questioned the Home Secretary on this point—we wanted to know why there has been a change. That is a reasonable request, because all Opposition parties have followed the Government’s position before and obviously we are keen to maintain unity on such measures. That is why these questions are so important. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West asked those questions, as did the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt).

On 31 January this year, after nine months, the Government of Lebanon formed. In the new Government of Lebanon the Health Ministry is, I believe, held by a Member of Parliament from Hezbollah and the Ministry of Finance has an ally linked to Hezbollah. It is therefore

not unreasonable to ask the Home Secretary, given what the Government were saying in this House last year and the year before, what has changed in that political assessment. It is very important that the Home Secretary shares with the House the change in their analysis. If he wants to take the whole House with him, and keep the House and the country together on these moves, he needs to be clearer in that position.

On the process of proscription, in my intervention on the Home Secretary I made the point that the list of proscribed organisations is getting longer and longer. Time moves on and the former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, Lord Anderson, made it clear that he thinks it needs to be updated and some organisations removed. I hope we can have a bit more from the Home Secretary, if he replies to the debate, on whether he will keep it under review and remove organisations. That is not helpful, given that there are very severe penalties for people who link to such organisations. If organisations should not be proscribed, people should not be in danger of being imprisoned.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

8.31 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind): I took part briefly in the debate in January a year ago, which was secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan). It was very clear at that time that the Government were uncomfortable with the existing position. The Labour Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, had come out very strongly to call for a total ban on Hezbollah—not just the military, but the political wing—following the flags on demonstrations in the centre of London and the slogans that were chanted which were clearly threatening and intimidatory towards British citizens. It seems to me astonishing that the Labour Front Bench is unable to recognise and support the clear call by the Mayor of our capital city that there should be a total ban on Hezbollah.

When we had a Labour Government in this country, we were tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime. It may be that today we are soft on terrorism and soft on the causes of terrorism. One of the causes of terrorism is that we do not confront and challenge the ideologies that drive it. Whether it is terrorism that comes out of hatred of other communities in the United Kingdom or whether it comes out of a warped distortion of a faith, there are, globally, different terrorist organisations and they have to be challenged, confronted and dealt with. People in this country, as well as in other countries, have to be protected. We are facing a real challenge if we do not recognise the need to have tough but fair security measures for our community as a whole. In Britain today, there are people who are afraid because we are allowing terrorist organisations and their supporters to parade, threaten and challenge.

We need to be very clear that the decision we take tonight has to be followed up by action to enforce what we are about to agree. It is no good Parliament legislating and then not enforcing it. The message has to go out to the Metropolitan police and it has to go out to local authorities. It has to go out to different institutions in our country that there is no place for terrorists, terrorist apologists or terrorist organisations in UK society.

8.34 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes). He is still very much my friend and he is one of the most honourable people I have had the privilege to know. There is a long and proud tradition—a strong, proud social democratic tradition—in the Labour party of confronting and facing down murderous, hateful ideology, and I deeply regret that that proud tradition has not found expression at the Opposition Front Bench Dispatch Box this evening. But it will find expression on the Back Benches: I am here to support the Government unequivocally and without hesitation, not simply because I have to go back to my constituency and look in the eye the people who sent me here, but because when I go home this evening, I have to be able to look at myself in the mirror, too.

There is no doubt about what the Government seek to ban and confront in the motion. Hezbollah makes no distinction between its political and military wings and it is farcical that this Government and this country, for too long, have drawn such a distinction. We have already heard the words of the deputy secretary general of Hezbollah, Naim Qassem, but let us hear some more. He said that

“the history of Jews has proven that, regardless of the Zionist proposal, they are people who are evil in their ideas”.

Hassan Nasrallah said

“God imprinted blasphemy on the Jews’ hearts”—
and:

“If we searched the entire world for a person more cowardly, despicable, weak and feeble in psyche, mind, ideology and religion, we would not find anyone like the Jew. Notice, I do not say the Israeli.”

That is what we are up against—that sort of stomach-turning antisemitism. It is the sort of conduct, I am afraid, that in the Labour party gets you a reminder of conduct letter these days, but some of us will not be bystanders to Jew hatred.

Let us look at Hezbollah’s murderous terrorism—the slaughter of innocent people around the world. There is no doubt that Hezbollah is a violent, murderous, barbaric cult and of course, it is right that the Government have therefore taken this decision. It is not just about the operations that it has mounted in its own country.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that while this move sends a message to the world, it is also sends a message to our communities about community cohesion, which is that words have consequences and that politics are as important as the military wing in tackling terrorism?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. It underpins why the decision that the Government are putting before us this evening is, if overdue, very strongly welcome.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I listened very carefully to the words of the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that not opposing the order is just not good enough? We cannot be neutral in the face of an antisemitic terrorist organisation.

Wes Streeting: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have not seen a parliamentary Labour party briefing on this topic, which is regrettable. It means that I do not

know the lines to take, so I have just had to come up with my own. I say plainly, simply and unequivocally that it is not good enough simply to say, “We won’t be opposing.” We should be making it clear that we would troop through the Lobby and vote for the motion if there is a Division. That is what people across the country and in my constituency want to hear.

Finally, I welcome the fact that Hezbollah flags will not be flown on the streets of our capital city, and I strongly support the Mayor of London’s leadership on this issue, but let us not lose sight of what Hezbollah is doing right now in Syria. Syria Solidarity UK is quite right to say that it is not just about flag waving and what is going on here; we must not lose sight of what is happening in Syria, too. For as long as my constituents send me to this place, I will sit here proudly as a Labour MP from a strong social democratic tradition, standing up for the values that our party was founded to champion.

8.38 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): At the outset, I commend the Home Secretary’s words and the way in which he introduced this matter to the House. Every time that he speaks, he grows in stature, both within this place and indeed across our nation. I commend him for the strong stand that he is taking on these matters. Indeed, when I walk into this Chamber each day, I walk under an arch that bears a memorial to three Members of this House who were murdered by the Provisional IRA. Robert Bradford, Airey Neave, and Ian Gow were murdered, of course, by its actions, but it was encouraged by the words of those who give succour to such people and those who would pay lip service and be apologists for those gangsters and terrorists. It is essential, therefore, that we send a strong message to the people who would give succour that there is no room for their words and that their words must also be condemned, and condemned thoroughly.

I appreciate the points being made across the House about Hezbollah, which was responsible for the deaths of 85 people in 1994, when it bombed a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires. It remains a threat to Jewish communities around the world, launching deadly attacks against civilians in Israel and Bulgaria and planning attacks in other places such as Cyprus. I remember standing in a southern district of Israel holding the remains of a rocket fired by Hezbollah terrorists at schoolchildren. Think of the absolute hatred of these people! They fire at schoolchildren, who are going about their normal lives yet facing attack and threat.

Many have discussed the intentions of Hezbollah tonight. It is not about attacking Israel but world Jewry and an entire community. The organisation’s intentions were made clear in 1992, when it stated:

“The war is on until Israel ceases to exist and the last Jew in the world has been eliminated”.

The hatred behind those words! The absolute condemnation comes from their own mouths.

We entirely support the actions that have been taken, but I ask the Home Secretary to consider adding the Muslim Brotherhood to the list as well. On 7 December 2017, the then Foreign Secretary made it clear in this House that he was considering pushing for the proscription of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is essential that the Home Secretary looks at that organisation and sees

whether it must also be proscribed. I believe that it should be. Organisations that encourage and mouth off terrorism and radicalise people should face the condemnation that Hezbollah is facing in the Chamber tonight.

8.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I also welcome the Home Secretary's comments today and the action to recognise Hezbollah for what it is. That sends a strong message to the world and those who wish to do us harm that the UK Government abhor terrorism in any form.

As we all know, Hezbollah is a well funded, powerful organisation that has a history of targeting British interests, including well documented links to attacks on British forces in Iraq. It killed 85 people in Argentina and five Israeli tourists in Bulgaria. A Hezbollah operative with a forged British passport in Cyprus had eight tonnes of fertiliser, to be used to make bombs against Jewish and Israeli targets. According to the CIA, Hezbollah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah has a history of being "directly involved in many Hezbollah terrorist operations, including hostage taking, airline hijackings, and attacks against Lebanese rivals".

I am therefore delighted that our country is now joining the US, Canada, the Netherlands, Israel and the Arab League in proscribing Hezbollah in full.

As well as being involved in international terrorism, Hezbollah plays a central role in the global drugs trade. There has been a wave of recent arrests in Europe of suspects linked to Hezbollah. Does the Home Secretary share my concern about the criminal activities in which Hezbollah operatives regularly engage, including drug dealing and money laundering? Will he confirm that proscription will restrict Hezbollah's ability to undertake such criminal activities in the UK? Is there a force directly tasked with addressing the issue?

Hezbollah has lost some 2,000 fighters in Syria. It has an arsenal of 150,000 rockets and 45,000 fighters, and it has said that its rockets can hit any part of Israel—even Tel Aviv. Does the Home Secretary agree that Hezbollah is one of the most destabilising forces in the region? Yesterday he stated that Hezbollah was continuing its attempts to destabilise the fragile situation in the middle east. We are no longer able to distinguish between its already banned military wing and its political party.

I thank the Home Secretary for making this decision. I think everyone in the House and the other place will support this motion, to make our people and our country safer. These are the sort of people who need to be put off the streets permanently.

8.44 pm

Sajid Javid: A number of Members have spoken in support of the order, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), my hon. Friends the Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and for Hendon (Dr Offord), the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) and for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) and the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), the two Ilfords—the hon. Members for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and for Ilford North (Wes Streeting)—and the hon. Members for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) and for Strangford

(Jim Shannon). The hon. Member for North Antrim also spoke passionately about the terrorism in Northern Ireland. I thank all those Members for their contributions.

I want to focus on two clear points. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton asked, "Why now?" I will give four reasons. First, there is secret intelligence. I think the House will understand why we cannot share it, but my right hon. Friend the Security Minister met the shadow Home Secretary earlier on Privy Council terms, and was able to share some of that information. There has been plenty of open-source information, especially in the last 12 months, in which there has been a step change in the activity of Hezbollah, particularly in Syria.

The proscription review group—a group of civil servants from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Home Office, the Department for International Development and others—makes an independent, objective assessment of the evidence that it has, and it has expressed the clear view that all these organisations, but in particular Hezbollah in its entirety, meet the definition of a terrorist organisation in the 2000 Act. Both the FCO and DFID have looked again at the work that they do in Lebanon. They are clear about the fact that they can continue that work, and support the legitimate Government of Lebanon and its people.

Finally, I want to give an opportunity to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for whom I have a great deal of respect. He is normally very strong on these issues, but the House is still not clear about one point. Let me give him that opportunity now. Does the Labour party—the official Opposition—support the proscription of Hezbollah? Yes or no? The shadow Minister wishes not to take that opportunity. We can only infer that the answer is no, which is a great shame.

It is right that we ban all three terrorist organisations to ensure that they cannot build support in the UK. I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 25 February, be approved.

Business without Debate

CHILDREN ACT 1989 (AMENDMENT) (FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION) BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 90(5) and Order of 14 February), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time and stood committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63(1)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 90(6)),

That the Public Bill Committee to which the Children Act 1989 (Amendment) (Female Genital Mutilation) Bill [Lords] is committed shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): For the convenience of the House, we will take motions 12 to 15 together.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ATOMIC ENERGY AND RADIOACTIVE SUBSTANCES)

That the draft Shipments of Radioactive Substances (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS)

That the Rules of the Court of Judicature (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.R. (N.I.), 2019, No. 8), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

That the Civil Procedure (Amendment) (EU Exit) Rules 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 147), which were laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Local Elections (Northern Ireland) (Election Expenses) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 4 February, be approved.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6) and Order of 19 February),

That, in pursuance of paragraph 2A of Schedule 3 of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, Ms Cindy Butts be appointed as a lay member of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years from 1 March 2019 to 29 February 2024.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults: Care Homes

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

8.48 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker, and thank you for being in the Chair for my first Adjournment debate, which concerns such an important matter.

The UK has a world-class national health service, full of the most fantastic doctors, nurses and support staff. It is a testament to our fantastic NHS that, for decades, we have generally seen life expectancy increase across the country. With increasing life expectancy, however, we have seen a growth in degenerative diseases such as dementia. For families living with a relative with dementia, it is an incredibly difficult experience to see a parent, for instance, lose the ability to talk and forget the essence of who they are. You never forget the first time that they look straight through you, having no idea who you are. I am sure that the Minister will extend her sympathies to the families across the country who live with those circumstances day in, day out.

Many families are increasingly reliant on extra care facilities and nursing homes to manage the healthcare needs of their elderly and vulnerable relatives. They will therefore experience the heart-wrenching feeling of visiting dozens of care facilities and wondering if their loved one will be happy and safe there—will the care be good enough? Sadly, my family and I have found out what happens when the answers to these questions is no. While the majority of those working in the care sector are wonderful and deserve medals for the incredible service they provide, there are, as in any industry, those who are not, and who, sadly, prey on the vulnerable.

I am going to now share something that is not at all easy to talk about. Minister, there are some phone calls you never wish to receive, and I can say that one of them is the hushed phone call from a carer who knows your family, who tells you that as a matter of urgency you need to come to the care facility and check on your loved one because they have been hurt. Nothing prepares you for arriving to find your loved one with black eyes, bruises, cuts and blood on their face. And I can tell you, Mr Speaker, that nothing prepares you for discovering that these injuries in fact happened three days previously and nobody called you, no one alerted you, nobody called an ambulance despite the fact that somebody had a head injury, was on blood thinners and is elderly, and with not a single person—not one—having any answers as to how this may have happened or any proof at all as to how this occurred.

My father has dementia. It started very young and affects a part of his brain that is involved with speech. He is fully aware of everything and even has memory, but his days as a university lecturer would be hard to imagine now were you to meet him, as not only does he not speak, but he can only sing in his mother tongue—which I have never heard him even speak in my lifetime. This makes him extremely vulnerable as he is unable to communicate with those who do not know him. As his children, however, my brother and I can understand his body language and his emotions; we know when he is

happy, we know when he is sad, and unfortunately we now know what his demeanour is when he is deeply, deeply frightened.

He was found extremely distressed by a carer covered in bloody injuries which would have caused a great deal of blood loss wherever they had taken place. To our horror we were told that he had not left the building overnight, there was no evidence of him having fallen and no other resident had any evidence of injury. Quite unexpectedly, the centre manager suddenly left and not a single person had any excuse for what had happened or why we were not called. Three days—three days—it took for us to receive a phone call, which came in the manner of a hushed call from a carer who was leaving the very next day. She said she was entirely aware that we had not been told and deeply thought that we should know.

As any family would, we complained immediately to Wandsworth Council, which contracts out the care to London Care, which manages Ensham House, which is owned and run by Optivo. I am sad to say that there our nightmare began, and that nightmare is the reason for this debate, for if two young professionals can endure what happened in the following months in pursuit of answers I fear deeply for the elderly in our community, such as the 80-year-old woman who herself is frail, who is caring for her husband with dementia, and who is too fearful to speak out for fear of going through what I am about to describe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter to the Chamber. She and I spoke about it last night, so I had a bit of an idea of what the issues were going to be. I commend her for bringing us her personal story and this exposé of what has happened to her family. Does she agree that the ability of former owners and management of care homes that have received bad ratings simply to operate elsewhere under a new name is not conducive to openness and transparency, and that consideration must be given to introducing further and better regulation of the staff, management and ownership of these homes, which house some of the most vulnerable people in the UK? Unfortunately, we have had similar circumstances in Northern Ireland, and they are heartbreaking for the families. I understand exactly what the hon. Lady is saying.

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I entirely agree with him. This debate is about safeguarding all our vulnerable adults, including his constituents and all the people up and down the country who want and deserve the very best for their families.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an incredibly powerful speech, and I congratulate her on securing this, her first, Adjournment debate. The experience that she is sharing with us speaks volumes as to why we need to make improvements to the way in which care homes are regulated, and particularly to the way in which the complaints and concerns of relatives are dealt with. This Minister for Care and her predecessors in the role will know that I have raised consistently the case of my constituent, Mr John Barrass, whose mother passed away in a care home in circumstances that have never, in his view, been satisfactorily explained.

He has fought for eight years to get the answers that he requires. Does the hon. Lady agree that the points she is raising illustrate only too well the need to ensure that there is more transparency and clarity for relatives?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I am sorry that his constituent has had to live through that for eight years. I know how terribly difficult it has been to deal with such a situation for one year. His constituent is very lucky to have him raising this matter on his behalf again.

From the very first meeting with the safeguarding team at Wandsworth Council, my brother and I felt as though we were being put on trial. A new manager from Ensham House was present, but he had no idea about what had happened to my father, despite having been sent the horrific photos of his brutal injuries. The safeguarding team had not even looked at them. London Care had no answers as to why we were not called, and again had no answers as to how it could have happened. It was not until the wonderful police officer arrived, at my request, viewed the photos and showed visible alarm at the injury patterns that the Wandsworth Council staff actually took notice. I would like to extend my thanks to the fantastic police that we have in Wandsworth and up and down the country, who give of themselves day and night to ensure the safety of our community, even though they often stand up for people for whom they may never get answers.

It was agreed with Wandsworth Council's safeguarding team that a police investigation would now commence, but it was explained to us that because Optivo housing association had not placed any CCTV cameras anywhere in Ensham House other than in the communal areas, and because my father could not communicate what had happened to him, it was very likely that we would not receive the answers we were looking for, and that a criminal conviction would be very difficult to obtain. As the police commenced their investigation, we expected the council to start conducting its own investigation, at the very least, because regardless of whether there had been criminal activity, questions needed answering. They were not answered, however.

In the following months, we found my father bruised again on two further occasions, with no explanation. He started to sleep in the communal area, for fear of being alone in his room. By this time, the Ensham House care staff knew that we were paying close attention because we were incredibly concerned, and that is when they started to attempt to claim that, despite a year of living there with no issues relating to him, my father was being difficult. The allegations were not corroborated by his community psychiatric team or any staff at the day centre where he spent up to 25 hours a week, and there had been no record of any issues prior to the first incident. Relatives of other residents started to tell us that staff had boasted that they were trying to get dad out because we were asking too many questions.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend not only on securing this debate, but on sharing her personal experience. By doing so, I hope that we will see some change. Where Wandsworth Council and other councils contract out care to private providers, does she agree that the right checks and balances must be in place to ensure that her father's situation happens to no one else?

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is about scrutiny, but it is also about saying that a Care Quality Commission rating is not good enough, because vulnerable patients cannot articulate their needs, fill in forms or speak the truth accurately to a shiny inspection team when a care facility prepares for their arrival.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is brave to make a speech in the Chamber about her personal experiences. Does she agree that one of the most disconcerting things about what has happened to her family is to think about the impact on other families who are not as well informed or as articulate and who do not have a doctor or MP in the family? They will be vulnerable and distraught, but they will not have the opportunity to engage in the same way as my hon. Friend.

Dr Allin-Khan: It is for the very reasons that my hon. Friend so beautifully articulates that I am using this platform to raise this issue. This is no longer about my father; this is about every single member of our society—the veterans who fought in our wars, the older people who worked so hard for us to enjoy the liberty that we have today. I am speaking about this for our families, friends, neighbours, loved ones and the people to whom we owe our lives.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I join colleagues from across the House in commending the hon. Lady for her incredibly brave speech. I am in awe of how she is articulating her case this evening. As a former co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, I am conscious of the fact that we are at the start of a ticking dementia timebomb and that more and more people will fall victim to this cruel, horrible disease in the coming years, making them far more vulnerable in their communities than ever before. Does she agree that now is the time to ensure that the right safeguarding measures are in place, both for today and for the future?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Lady—I will call her my hon. Friend—who is tireless in fighting against loneliness and for people to have dignity in their communities, and she makes the most essential of points: we are at the start of a ticking timebomb.

While all this was going on, my father was admitted to hospital one afternoon for a routine issue. As we were undressing him, we found bruises all over his body. Did the Ensham House care staff phone to check on him? No. Did Optivo show any care? No. Instead, we were served an eviction notice, detailing a list of allegations against my father without any evidence. How heartless is it to receive an eviction notice while in hospital? What did Wandsworth Council do at this time? Nothing. What was London Care doing? In the space of just five months, London Care had five separate managers at Ensham House. This all started after the first incident with my father. One manager after another came and went, unfamiliar with my father's safeguarding cases. Some were hostile, others made up incidents involving my father being difficult. Dementia is a degenerative illness, but it does not spiral downwards overnight. Prior to those incidents, as I previously mentioned, not a single issue regarding my father's difficult behaviour had ever been reported.

In all meetings, it was agreed that the extra care setting was appropriate for my father as he still knew his way around the area, he had a level of independence and my very young daughters felt comfortable visiting him there. Why deny someone their last few months of independence? The extra care setting was deemed by the social services team and everyone involved to be entirely appropriate for him. However, each time we interacted with Ensham House care staff following the first incident in which we found my father beaten, and when we had not been called, we felt as though we were on trial, that we had somehow made up the fact that he was acting afraid, and our concerns were dismissed by a different manager every month.

We found multiple examples of my father's medication not being written on the drug chart, with London Care saying that he had refused medication when we had seen him take it. We even found one manager had written a note in the staff communication book asking staff to write negative comments about my father in his care notes. The final nail in the coffin, and the point of no return, was when we found my father unconscious on the floor, with blood on the walls and the floor, and a carer's set of keys left next to him. Following this, he spent one month in hospital.

Four months after that final event in October, there was nothing from Wandsworth Council addressing any of these concerns. The catalogue of disasters crescendoed last week, when the director of adult social services at Wandsworth Council, Liz Bruce—who had refused to look at photos of my father's injuries, did not know how many open safeguarding complaints there were relating to my father, did not talk to anyone else who knew my dad and had never met him herself—declared that my father had sustained the injuries because “he had asked for it.” Despite police voicing their concerns in the meeting and saying that they cannot rule out abuse, despite her failure to investigate London Care fully and despite her clearly having no detailed knowledge of the case, she chose to use Optivo's letter, which was full of unsubstantiated claims in the language of the Ensham House managers, as her proof. Well, I think we can all agree that this is a dangerous, highly unprofessional and highly unsatisfactory approach.

Of course it is easier to blame the patient and the family, anything other than looking inwards and accepting responsibility for the fact that the council is awarding care contracts to organisations that are, frankly, unsafe. Quoting CQC ratings in safeguarding communications, when it is well known that patients are fearful to talk, is frankly unacceptable. If this were happening to the UK's children, the country would be in uproar, and rightly so. Someone living with dementia is just as dependent in their final years as children are in their first years.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Allin-Khan: I am just finishing.

With an ageing population and an increase in degenerative illnesses, this issue will only get worse. As parliamentarians, we must act now to ensure that even more families do not experience the horror of finding their loved one bruised, bleeding and terrified. We owe it to the elderly in our community. We owe it to the

vulnerable. We have to be their voice. They should not be deprived of their quality of life. We must give our vulnerable a fair chance at ageing safely and gracefully. Their voices must be heard.

9.9 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinéage): I would like to start by congratulating the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) on securing this debate. Her speech this evening has been described as brave, but she took the time out yesterday to talk me through this incredibly distressing case, so she has been brave twice. She deserves all our respect and credit for doing that, because, as has been pointed out by others, she is not just talking about her own individual case, tragic though that is, but by articulating it in such an incredibly courageous way, she is also helping to support others who do not have this opportunity to share their voice and raise their concerns in the same way.

Everyone in this House has the same motivation, which is to ensure that our care services for the most vulnerable people are safe and of the highest quality. The hon. Lady talks powerfully about dementia, which is a priority for me personally. I have experienced what it is like to have a close family member, my grandmother, living with dementia. So many people up and down the country share that experience, and I think we all recognise that a dementia diagnosis is one for not only the individual concerned but their whole family. That is why I am so passionate about the need to ensure that those affected by this condition and others are cared for in the best possible way and that a robust complaints process for redress is in place if their care falls short of that.

It would be bad enough if the terrible situation that the hon. Lady describes were taking place in care homes—that would be disgusting and terrible—but she is talking about an extra care facility. Such a facility is where people have their own self-contained homes; they have their own front doors and their own legal right to occupy. So this is a failure of care in someone's own home—it is a domiciliary care situation. That is why I am even more concerned about what can happen behind closed doors in an individual's own house. To have a loved one affected by a degenerative illness is terrible for the individual and a matter of huge worry for their family. So I have previously said in this House that every allegation of abuse and neglect should be thoroughly investigated, with prosecutions brought where this is found.

Alex Sobel: First, I wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for her courage and alacrity in her speech. Some constituents came to me about their mother, who had been sexually assaulted in a care home, not by the staff, but by another patient. I was dismayed to hear that unlike nurseries, care homes have no minimum staffing ratio. Will the Minister look into having minimum staffing ratios in care homes, so that these events do not happen?

Caroline Dinéage: That is a very interesting question. I have not considered the minimum staffing issue before. We are of course very concerned about training and ensuring that all care staff have a care certificate, so that there is a minimum level of skills training. However, the point about ratios is interesting, and I will take it into consideration.

I do not have a massive amount of time left, so I am not going to discuss in full the details of the individual case raised by the hon. Member for Tooting. However, I must reassure her that what she has raised today is something I take very seriously. My officials have informed me that her raising her concerns so effectively and our inquiries from our office as well have prompted Wandsworth Council to hold another meeting today to discuss her case and review the evidence. As a result, there will be an outcomes meeting—

Dr Allin-Khan: Will I be invited?

Caroline Dinéage: It will be held for all parties to consider recommendations going forward and the hon. Lady will be able to attend. We look forward to hearing the outcome, and we will all be keeping a close eye on what transpires.

Tracey Crouch: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is slightly shocking to us all and in particular the family member of the victim in question, who has not been told by the council that this meeting is taking place? In many respects, that is part of the issue raised by the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan): the family of the victim have not been included in any of these discussions or any of this process in the first place.

Caroline Dinéage: That is a very fair point and I am very keen that family members should be involved in the next stage of this meeting going forward. I will be keeping a very close eye on whether that does happen.

In the last few moments available, I want to talk about some of the things we have been doing to protect vulnerable people and some of the actions people can take if, heaven forbid, they find themselves in a similar situation. The Competition and Markets Authority published its care homes market study in 2017, shining a light on some instances of very poor and unacceptable consumer practices in the care homes sector. We accepted all its recommendations and have been putting forward a package of measures to address this. The CMA has also recently published guidance that it provides to care homes on how to meet their consumer law obligations. That has been a key milestone for the sector, and I am encouraged by the commitment some providers have already made to challenge some unfair practices.

Individuals and their families always have a right to complain about the care in a care home or about a domiciliary home care provider. Care homes must make it easy to complain and deal with the complaint quickly and fairly. Any care home that does not meet its obligations is in breach of consumer law, as well as many other things, and could face enforcement action by bodies such as trading standards or the CMA. The CQC encourages the public to share their experience through an online feedback mechanism.

Of course, it is only worth having a complaints system if people know about it and how to access it, which is why, through a joint sector initiative called Quality Matters, we are taking action to improve access to complaints systems and improve the feedback culture in the sector. That is an ongoing piece of work involving the local government and social care ombudsman—to which complaints and concerns about adult social care should be raised—and Healthwatch.

[Caroline Dinenage]

We are committed to preventing and reducing the risk of harm to adults in vulnerable situations. We have made it clear that there is statutory guidance to support the Care Act 2014, and we expect local authorities to ensure that the services they commission are safe and of high quality. We also expect those providing the service, local authorities and the CQC to take very swift action if there are any allegations of abuse, neglect or poor care.

Under section 42 of the 2014 Act, local authorities have a duty to carry out safeguarding enquiries. To aid them in that, they have the power to request information from a provider's business. The CQC monitors how well providers are giving that information. As part of its inspection regime, the CQC also has to check whether there are effective systems to help to keep adults safe from abuse. The CQC has a duty to act promptly whenever safeguarding issues are discovered during inspections. As the hon. Member for Tooting said, abuse is ultimately a police matter, and if it is suspected, the police must carry out an investigation to determine whether offences have been committed.

We have introduced the new wilful neglect offence specifically to help to eradicate the abuse of people who depend on care services. We have also introduced tougher inspections of care services by the CQC. Thanks in part to this strengthened regime, we have seen a steady improvement in the quality of services, with 83% of adult social care settings now rated as good or outstanding by the CQC. Obviously, every single incident like the one the hon. Lady described and every single concern raised by worried family members makes us want to redouble our efforts to raise the quality. We have been supporting the CQC to understand how it can better hold providers to account where there is any failure.

Let me end by highlighting the hon. Lady's enormous dedication, representing not only her constituency but the whole country. Whether someone is looking after their own father, mother, husband, wife, son or daughter, we all expect the care provided to be caring and of good quality. We must work and redouble our efforts to ensure that where failure happens, it must be stamped out and cannot be allowed to continue.

9.18 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 26 February 2019

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Unhealthy Housing: Cost to the NHS

9.30 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for attending the debate, particularly the Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day); the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn); and the Minister. I look forward to positive contributions from all those able to participate.

I am grateful to have been allocated the debate. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings, I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise awareness and concerns about the cost of unhealthy homes to the NHS. I thank the background staff, who are in the Gallery, who have given information to us all, myself in particular, to help us in the debate.

Our APPG was created to shed light on the many problems caused to our nation's health, wellbeing and economy as a result of people living and working in unhealthy homes and buildings. Given that most of us spend some 90% of our time indoors, it stands to reason that our homes need to contribute positively to our physical and mental health and wellbeing, not diminish it. This debate is so important because it pulls together the critical issues. It is perhaps not a normal Westminster Hall debate, but it pushes very much to the fore the effect of the homes that we live in on our health and, ultimately, on the NHS.

The APPG, following a weight of written and oral evidence received, launched a report, "Building our Future: Laying the Foundations for Healthy Homes and Buildings", in October last year. It was a well addressed report, to which there were many contributions, and it brought together those with a deep interest in homes and those with a deep interest in health issues. It is good to have the report finished.

I have given the Minister a copy of the report, which contains a series of excellent recommendations that are helpful to the Government and will help us to move forward. I hope the debate will be a turning point, and that those recommendations will lay the foundations for change. The report sets out what needs to be done to ensure that new and existing homes do not cause or exacerbate health problems, because they often do. Many of us here, as elected representatives, will have people coming to us every week to complain about their home and, more often than not, the health problems related to that.

This debate is long overdue. It is time to raise awareness of the extent of the problem, and to recognise the human cost to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland of doing nothing. It is clear from the White Paper that unhealthy homes cost the economy and our society each and every year. Living in or occupying unhealthy homes directly and negatively impacts on human health. Unhealthy homes that lack daylight, or are cold, damp, poorly insulated, energy inefficient, overcrowded, noisy, badly designed and generate poor indoor air quality can, in the extreme, lead to unnecessary deaths.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is an old friend of mine. I think he knows that those of us who campaign on carbon monoxide poisoning really welcomed his excellent report. I have lost three constituents to carbon monoxide poisoning, which is one symptom of an unhealthy home. I assure him that we will work closely with him to ensure that no more people die of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), who is sat to my left, also had constituents who passed away a few years ago due to carbon monoxide poisoning. That was in a holiday home, but it was none the less a problem. We in the APPG will take the comments of the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on board, and we look forward to working with him.

Let me detail some of my concerns arising from the evidence that we heard. The effects of poor housing are estimated to cost the NHS £2.5 billion per annum; that rises when we consider all housing throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The true cost lies in human misery and lives lost. Some of the figures are quite extreme, but they underline the issue. Some 43,900 excess winter deaths occurred in England and Wales in the winter of 2014-15, with cold homes causing one fifth of those. That is more than the number of deaths caused by road accidents, alcohol or drug abuse, which puts into perspective the need to make sure that homes are healthy. Children in cold homes are more than two times more likely to suffer from a respiratory problem. Cold homes increase the incidence of cold and flu, and worsen conditions such as arthritis and rheumatism. Again, we see that every day in our constituencies.

One in four adolescents living in a cold home is at risk of multiple mental health problems, so we are not always talking about physical issues; there can be emotional and mental issues as well. Those in poor-quality homes that lack effective ventilation suffer from indoor air pollution, which has been linked to allergies, asthma, lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease and, more recently, dementia.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and on championing this cause. I apologise: I will not be here for the whole debate. I am double-booked. There have been steps forward on this issue, such as the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, which was recently taken through Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck). However,

[*Andy Slaughter*]

are conditions not getting worse for a lot of people? My experience is that there are two principal causes—the failure to build social housing, and the benefit cap—that force people into substandard accommodation in the private rented sector. Given the hon. Gentleman's party's special influence over the Government, could he persuade them to change those two egregious policies, which cause so much human misery?

Jim Shannon: If only we had that power! That is not to take away from the importance of the issue of social housing, which I will touch on later. Let us be honest: many people go into the housing that their pockets allow. As a result, they end up in housing that is not particularly in the right category, the right condition or the right shape. The hon. Gentleman is right that the benefit cap also dictates where someone can go. I will give the Minister plenty of time to get her thoughts together on that. However, that is an important point, and I will touch on it later.

Poor indoor air quality has an annual cost to the UK of more than 204,000 healthy life years. It causes thousands of deaths per year, and gives rise to health costs in the order of tens of millions of pounds. One third of people in the United Kingdom suffer from mould in their homes and are at increased risk of respiratory problems, infections, allergies and asthma. Just last week, I saw three constituents with mould growth issues in their houses—mould not caused by condensation, but ingrained in the walls. Sometimes ensuring that the housing associations or housing executive take those issues on board is quite a job.

There are more than half a million overcrowded households. The issue affects one in 10 children—something we cannot ignore. Overcrowding is linked to health and development issues, including meningitis, respiratory conditions, slow growth rates, accidents in the home, stress, anxiety, depression and poor adult health. Occupants of poor-quality housing are more likely to suffer from restricted daylight and noise pollution.

We cannot ignore noise pollution. In the news this morning someone put forward the idea of building houses and flats over railway lines. I am not sure if any hon. Member saw that. The first thing that came to my mind was the noise of the trains continually going underneath. How could those homes be adapted to mitigate that? We need to address noise pollution. Natural light helps to improve the recovery times of long-stay patients and reduces anxiety and the need for medication. Noise pollution can cause long-term health issues and increase stress and the risk of cardiovascular effects.

It is clear that there is a lack of public awareness of these problems, and limited knowledge of the facts. Too often, the homes we live in are, in so many ways, causing or aggravating health problems.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is making a very good speech, and I am nervous about intervening again, but will he accept this point? He talks about the noise pollution from living over a railway, and we know that private rented accommodation is a real problem. On the other side of the equation, very modern and expensive housing that is totally hermetically sealed could be as

dangerous, because it traps all the gases and pollutants within the home—not only carbon monoxide, but many other emissions.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. I ask hon. Members making interventions to address the Chair, and not somebody at the back of the room, not only so that I can hear but, more importantly, so that the Minister can hear.

Mr Sheerman: Will you forgive me, Mr Robertson?

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I would not want to miss anything that the hon. Gentleman said; that is the point.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for Huddersfield for intervening again. It is always good to have him adding his words of wisdom to any debate, at any time, in this Chamber or in the main Chamber. The issue is clear: too often, the homes that we live in are, in many ways, causing or aggravating health problems. That cannot be ignored. Given the plethora of health issues that I have identified as caused by unhealthy homes, and given the cost to the NHS, it is time to ask who in Government is responsible and accountable. We look to the Minister for answers.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): One issue that has been raised with me in Northern Ireland—I am sure that it affects the whole United Kingdom—is that when it comes to old and listed buildings, and particularly rows of listed houses, it is sometimes very difficult to get adaptations done, because they have to be done in a certain way.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend highlights one of the kernels of the debate. Our white paper calls on the Government to take a holistic approach to future housing and ensuring that people's health and wellbeing is placed at the heart of the built environment. That is clearly what my hon. Friend is saying, and that is where we are. Our white paper states that there must be effective leadership, and recommends that there be one Department responsible for healthy homes and buildings to ensure, critically, that homes and buildings maintain the highest standards for health and wellbeing; to identify where homes and buildings are causing health issues; to measure the economic and social benefits of healthier homes and buildings; to reduce health inequalities, of which there are many across the postcodes of the United Kingdom; and to provide for a common definition and approach to policy, regulation and standards. That makes complete sense to me.

Furthermore, an interdepartmental Government committee involving all Departments and agencies responsible for health, housing and construction—including the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and Public Health England—should be formed to ensure that health and wellbeing is placed at the heart of existing and future housing provision.

If we are to build houses, let us build them right. Let us ensure that the issues to which the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred do not arise, whether the homes

are very expensive or of a lesser quality. I have serious concerns about the standards and quality of new housing inadvertently being driven downwards, without consideration of the cost to human health. In the context of the Government's very healthy ambition to build 300,000 new homes and their healthy new towns initiative, standards must be driven upwards. It is essential that the Government adopt a holistic approach to delivery that addresses safety, space, energy efficiency, ventilation, heating, noise, air quality and lighting. We must all want to see quality new homes and communities being built with health and wellbeing in mind. I hope that the Government will agree that maximising the occupants' health and wellbeing must be placed at the centre of new housing provision and building design.

Of course, we live in homes that have already been built, most of us in the privately owned or privately rented sector, to which the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred. Renovation of existing housing stock must also become a Government priority. This is not just about building new homes, but about ensuring that the homes that we already have are up to standard. Our white paper calls on the Government to develop plans to retrofit existing homes to maximise health and wellbeing and improve health performance.

Today, I have set out the problems caused by unhealthy homes and buildings. I now call on the Government to take on board the recommendations in the APPG for healthy homes and buildings white paper, which are as follows. There needs to be greater public awareness of the health problems exacerbated by unhealthy homes, and the health benefits to be gained through simple improvements and behavioural change. Importantly, how we live in the homes we build becomes part of where we are. In building new homes, priority must be given to ensuring that people's health and wellbeing is foremost, specifically at the planning stage and through the national planning policy framework. Again, we look to the Minister for responses on these issues.

The Government need to commit to building greater numbers of quality social and affordable homes to help to alleviate issues of overcrowding and poor physical and mental health, which are all part of this. The Government need to optimise the health performance of new and existing homes, and ensure that they are built or retrofitted to "full health". There must be greater focus on enforcement and quality control of home renovation standards, so there is a role for councils to play when it comes to checking the work that is done and ensuring that it is done to an acceptable standard.

The Government must commit to building the evidence base and promoting the link between housing and health and wellbeing. That would result in considerable savings to healthcare costs, increased educational attainment, improved productivity, and people leading longer, healthier and happier lives. The exact cost of unhealthy housing to the public purse, and the human cost, in terms of health and wellbeing, educational attainment and social care, is unfathomable. To date, Government attention to and policy thinking about this problem have been—I say this respectfully—woefully absent. We ask the Minister to address the issue in her response. We are looking for constructive comments. That is what I am about—indeed, what we are all about in the House—but we do need answers on what we are putting forward.

Ultimately, the recommendations made in the white paper provide the basis for a step change in policy, which will drive up standards and help to reduce the health problems caused or made worse by living and working in unhealthy homes and buildings. That is the purpose of this debate: to consider how we can do this together, and better, across the whole United Kingdom. The white paper is testament to the need to build better quality homes and buildings, as well as to upgrade existing housing stock, which comprises the vast majority of the homes that people live in today. We need to do something with new homes and set the standards, and then we will have to do something with the homes that we already have to bring them up to the standard necessary.

It is beyond doubt that there is a problem that needs urgent action. There is a lot to be gained by building and retrofitting homes to the highest quality and standard to achieve health and wellbeing. These are the pluses: lower costs to the NHS and a healthier population; better finances; better educational attainment and workplace productivity; reduced emissions—the hon. Member for Huddersfield referred to carbon monoxide—lower energy bills and a lower carbon footprint; improved health, wellbeing and comfort; and greater life chances and independent living and care.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate, and on the work that he continues to do on these issues. Does he agree that the subject that he is entering into—the need to renovate and upgrade housing stock—is particularly applicable in lower socioeconomic areas, in both Northern Ireland and, I am sure, across the UK? In those areas, health issues are even more prevalent than in the rest of society, so his point about the benefit to the NHS is even more applicable with regard to those socioeconomic groups.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those are the cases that we deal with in our constituency offices each and every day. Those issues are the subject of the site meetings that we have with the executives of housing associations, and of the meetings that take place with councils' environmental health departments, back home and over here. There is a greater impact on those at a certain socioeconomic level, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) also said. Benefits also come into the process; there is the question of what people can afford to purchase and deal with.

I call on parliamentary colleagues from across the House to join me in taking forward the recommendations in the white paper, and call on the Government to join together and provide the necessary leadership and focus. We look to the Minister to do those things. The cost-benefit and rewards could be significant. The economic burden and sheer human misery created by poor homes and buildings, to which other hon. Members have referred, are simply too great to ignore.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for being here, and thank those Members who have come along to make a contribution. It is so important for us to deal with this issue. We look to the Minister for a significant and positive response—no pressure, but we do think it is important that we air these issues.

9.49 am

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I pay credit to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and for all the work he does with the all-party parliamentary group, from which I have enjoyed gaining expertise and knowledge. The cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS is a fantastic subject to tackle, especially in the middle of winter. We have not had a particularly cold spell yet—that is still around the corner—but nearly a year ago, a few days of significant snow cut off my village, which is extremely rare in the warm south-west.

It is great to speak on this important and urgent issue, but it is not new for me. When I pitched up as a new MP, all sorts of people came to tell me how good or bad my constituency was. I met a representative of the Association for the Conservation of Energy—ACE—who came to see me and said that my constituency had the leakiest homes in England, and potentially in Europe, based on off-grid and poor-quality buildings. We were not good at cavity walls 30 or 40 years ago—perhaps longer. I took that seriously because I was concerned about the issue of fuel poverty—we are a low-wage area—and about people's health.

Cornwall Council and others, including my colleagues and me, have worked together to find the money to improve our homes. As of January, we have improved 1,085 homes and taken them out of fuel poverty altogether by securing various bits of money from all sorts of funds, including social landlords. As I say, it is an urgent issue. In particular, I credit Anthony Ball and his public health team at Cornwall Council for leading on the issue and for their great expertise on how to resolve the challenge.

From the figures that the council has provided, it is estimated that 210 people in Cornwall die due to the cold every year; that poor health resulting from a lack of warm homes affects 31,000 households—74,000 people—in a population of just under half a million; and that a winter death in Cornwall is preceded by eight emergency admissions to our hospitals, which are already under pressure, and 30 social care visits. As is true elsewhere in the country, delivering social care in Cornwall is a challenge, because it is a large but sparsely populated geographical area with a lack of people working in it and a distance to travel between appointments.

If there are potentially 30 unnecessary visits for each individual because of cold homes, that puts pressure on an already strained system. It is estimated that that costs the health service in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly £13 million each year, which could go to areas of health and social care where we would much rather spend our money, instead of collecting people because they are living in poor homes that can be fixed.

I have long campaigned on unhealthy homes and the need to fix them. As a newly elected MP, one of my early debates was about fuel poverty, in which I made similar points to those that other Members and I hope to make today. The previous Chancellor set aside £100 billion for infrastructure spending. I argued then, and I would still love the Minister to take it forward, that it would cost only £2 billion of that to improve UK homes and raise their energy performance certificate rating to C—if we trust those ratings. That would be £2 billion well spent, because of the saving to the economy, the saving of people's lives, and the improvement in attainment and economic productivity.

The recently published 10-year plan for the NHS is a welcome vision that sets out how the NHS needs to adapt over 10 years to meet current and changing demands; how we need to change the way we treat people and bring healthcare to people where they need it; and how to help people to manage their conditions. We are waiting for the Green Paper on social care, which we understand will come out in April. If we do not include one of the driving factors for why people end up in health and social care in the first place, however, that 10-year plan will be weakened or compromised.

That is why the debate is important, because now is the time to look across Government. If we want to deliver the NHS that we are all committed to and want to see in 10 years' time—if not much before—and if we want to make social care work for everyone who needs it, we need to look at how we improve our homes and the health and wellbeing of everybody in the country who lives in a home that is not up to the job. I call on the Minister to look at the issue across Departments to see what we can do to deliver a more sustainable health and social care service partly by improving the homes we live in.

In the 21st century, in the fifth-richest country in the world, we should have healthy homes that we can be proud of. We cannot tolerate the situation for much longer. I will give an example of how that could be achieved, because just to say, "There is £2 billion. Go and sort your homes out," will be a challenge. Money will be wasted and it will not be delivered in the way we would like or expect.

My suggestion, as it was when I first spoke on the issue, is to use Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly as a pilot. Cornwall Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly are well placed because they know the problem, the homes that need fixing and the skilled workforce in the area. There is also a challenge in Cornwall to drive up skills, to give people the opportunities they need and to drive up wages, which it could help with.

The pilot would improve all the homes in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, which are the leakiest in the country. It would be a good way for the Government to see if such a scheme works and how it works, and how we could improve homes, create skilled jobs and improve attainment in children. It is well proven that children learn better and are healthier in warm homes; it is not just older people who suffer as a result of leaky homes and fuel poverty.

That work could also reduce the carbon footprint, which is important. Cornwall Council recently voted to consider how it could make Cornwall carbon free in the next 30 years and achieve a net zero emissions target. Reducing the leaky nature of our homes and improving the carbon footprint with well-insulated homes is a significant part of that. As I said, improving homes will also reduce the demand on health and social care services.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak. This urgent issue presents a real challenge and I would welcome the opportunity for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly to demonstrate to the rest of the country how it can be tackled.

9.57 am

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing the debate.

Housing is central to the wellbeing of individuals, families and entire communities. When people have decent, safe accommodation, which is suited to their needs, they have a strong foundation on which to build their lives and expand their life chances. That in turn has a stabilising effect on their families, local neighbourhoods and the wider community.

Poor housing has the opposite effect. It can have a detrimental impact on many aspects of personal and community life, and can significantly affect the mental and physical health and wellbeing of the occupiers. Every week, I hear about housing problems from constituents. Their properties are often in a state of disrepair—cold, damp and mouldy. Living in poor housing such as that can take a significant toll on the physical health of an entire household by increasing the risk of cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological and musculoskeletal conditions, as we have heard.

People with underlying health complaints are particularly vulnerable. Poor housing can act as a trigger that causes asthma symptoms to worsen, which results in hospitalisation, or exacerbates symptoms of arthritis and reduces the ability of sufferers to perform everyday tasks proficiently, thereby increasing the risk of falls and accidents.

Moreover, when an individual's physical health deteriorates, their mental health is often affected. It stands to reason that if someone lives in a property that makes them physically ill, which fails to meet their family's needs and which makes life more difficult on a daily basis, they are likely to feel depressed and anxious, and their self-worth is liable to plummet. When physical and mental health is affected in this way, because homes are unsuitable, that has an impact on someone's wellbeing and their ability to participate in work, education, and social and other activities, and consequently impacts on public services such as social care and, of course, the NHS.

In Coventry, our local authority recognises the human costs for the individual of poor housing, as well as the economic costs for public services such as the NHS. That is why its new draft housing strategy places significant emphasis on improving the condition of the city's existing housing stock.

The strategy prioritises integration of the housing and public health departments to deliver affordable warmth projects, tackle fuel poverty and improve residents' overall health. It also aims to tackle rogue landlords who leave their tenants at risk as a result of poor maintenance, poor standards and poor management of homes, and it explores the option of introducing discretionary licensing schemes to improve standards. Moreover, it seeks to maximise the existing housing stock in the city and bring empty homes back into viable use.

Those are just a few steps that the council is taking to tackle the city's unhealthy homes, but it could do much more if it was given the necessary resources. With greater resources, the council could employ more enforcement officers, fund partnerships between advice agencies and GPs' surgeries, and fund for the long term "safe and well" checks, which would be conducted by the fire service when vulnerable people were discharged from hospital.

Sadly, the Government remain committed to their vicious austerity policies, which prevent the council from making long-term strategic interventions. Without

proper funding, I fear that, despite my council's best efforts, housing conditions will continue to deteriorate, damaging the lives and life chances of families and individuals, with the NHS of course picking up the tab.

10.1 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair this morning, Mr Robertson.

I start by thanking the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings for its report, which is excellent and so needed in the light of the serious housing situation in many of our constituencies. Consequently, I am delighted that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), is here in Westminster Hall today. I had wondered whether a Health Minister would respond to this debate, but it is really important to get to the root of these problems. We hear that £2.5 billion is the cost of unhealthy housing, which I think is a very modest estimate. If we could shift that money into building and retrofitting homes into a better condition, what a better society we would have.

Of course, I look back to Michael Marmot and the report he produced when he looked at the social determinants of poor health and identified housing within them. The report by Dame Carol Black also emphasised the impact of poor housing. And, of course, we know from living experience the impact of poor housing on our constituents today.

So this is a timely debate and an important debate. We must look not only at physical health. We have heard about respiratory conditions; as a former physiotherapist who worked in that area, I certainly know the impact that poor housing had on my patients. However, we must also look at mental health, which is also incredibly important; I see that every week in my constituency.

We also know that there is the wider issue of affordability, and the stresses and strains that the failed housing market places on our constituents. In York, buying a property now costs ten times the average wage and therefore it is becoming completely inaccessible. People are having to up sticks and make a choice about their career or their living environment. Renting is also completely inaccessible in the private rented sector, and in the social rented sector the amount of stock has been reduced and therefore people's options are also being reduced.

The quality of housing is also a massive issue. In York, 200 houses have a water course running under them—under the floorboards. As a result, there is damp, particularly at this time of year, which really impacts on the families in those houses. The council has a programme for those houses, but it is taking too long to move people out of their homes and make the changes that are required, which almost amounts to rebuilding the underneath of the property so that residents can move back in. So the quality of housing is a serious issue, including in York.

We have also heard about fuel poverty. I think we are all absolutely stunned into silence when we hear that 51,000 people in our country died prematurely last winter, with 46,000 of them being older people who were unable to afford to flick the switch and put their

[*Rachael Maskell*]

heating on. Those are unnecessary deaths and it deeply concerns me that we have not redressed this issue; it is essential that the Government put a real focus on it.

I will talk about one or two cases in my constituency that have completely appalled me. I have already shared the information about some of them with the Minister, and they have to do with the behaviour and the conduct of my local authority.

People will remember that a few weeks ago it was bitterly cold, with freezing fog. An 18-year-old woman in my constituency had not complied with all the obligations placed on her as a young person in housing; her complying with them was challenging, both for her and for the authority. Therefore, the authority removed her right to be in housing provision. Putting a young woman on to the streets is one thing; to do so in freezing conditions, when the temperature is minus 6° C, is another. So we really have to consider what was behind that decision. Thankfully, my office jumped in and secured that young woman a placement elsewhere, in the light of our holding up a mirror to that situation.

We also have to think about our homelessness services. I have spoken in many debates in this place about what has happened with homelessness. Again, dealing with homelessness is about the joining-up of services, to make sure, first of all, that Housing First is in place. I know that if Labour were in the administration in York, we would end homelessness within a term of being in charge of the council, because we believe that housing is a human right. We are a human rights city and we believe that it is a human right for people to be able to access a home. We know that not being able to access a home has a serious impact on people, including on their physical health. We know that 41% of the homeless population have serious physical health conditions and 45% have serious mental health conditions. However, there is also the tie-in with substance misuse and other issues that have a serious impact.

The case that perhaps shocked me the most was that of a woman whose partner had moved out of their home, for certain reasons. Initially she was left in the property, but because of the change in the tenancy she was then forced out of her property. A relationship breakdown is stressful enough for somebody, but being told that they have to leave their property because a tenancy—an arrangement—has changed, and having to move into another property, was incredibly stressful for my constituent. She became seriously ill: she lost two stone in weight; she developed anxiety and depression; and she became extremely ill. In fact, she could hardly speak, because the stress on her was so great that she could hardly talk. Her mental health was in a very poor place, and yet the council pursued her and continued to move her from her property. She lost her business, she lost her work and she ended up on benefits, and was finally forced to move over the Christmas period.

That kind of behaviour by our local authority is contemptible, and I say to the Minister today that we must have mechanisms by which we can put the impact of housing policy and housing policy decisions, not only on people's physical health but on their mental health too, at the heart of decision making, because that situation with my constituent should never have arisen. As soon as she started becoming ill, the council should have started to pull back, but it did not.

I have seen that with another tragic case in my constituency. A young man has support needs. He had been living with his parents, but sadly one of his parents died and then the other. However, the Government policy about successor rights for property meant that this young man, whose home was his place of safety, was turfed out of his home and then placed in hostel accommodation. In that accommodation he lost his security, his surroundings and the neighbours who had kept an eye on him, and he ended up walking the streets during the day. He found that incredibly difficult. He was dealing with the double trauma of losing his parents and then his home. We need to put compassion back into housing policy, because not doing so makes people ill.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her significant contribution. She has reminded me that in my office we have had three cases of homeless people over the past month, and the last one she referred to is very much in my mind. We seem to have people who slip under the microscope, with complex issues regarding health and losing their homes, contacts and friends. As the hon. Lady said, we need a better way of dealing with those issues. One way to ensure that those people do not fall under the radar would be to mark up any early-recognised physical or mental issues as a priority for the officer.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. A home is not just a physical structure of bricks and mortar; it is a whole environment in which someone lives and probably spends most of their time, whether asleep or awake. It is a security, a setting, and a place where the family is based, and it affects someone's wellbeing.

We must take a more humane approach to housing, and York, as a human rights city, is determined to see that. Housing is a major issue in the city; we have a massive supply problem. Every time the Government say they are building more homes, I say, "But not in York". Our council has completely failed on that front, and it now looks like the local plan, which has been prevaricated over, is in real danger of falling because sites are pulling away. We have overcrowding because we do not have the housing supply we need, which means we have families who have been living on sofas for months on end. I received a letter just this last week about a gentleman who is not well and has been sleeping on the sofa for three months. The council has not intervened in that kind of case. It is right that we get a local plan to build the housing the city needs to address future accommodation needs—not all those luxury apartments we see going up everywhere.

My final point concerns my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for ageing and older people, and the provision we are making for our older people, ensuring that we have the right environments for them to live in. Increasingly, older people live in the private rental sector, which provides insecurity in later life. Others in the sector also face that insecurity, but it is compounded in the later stages of life. It is really important to build secure housing for older people.

We know that isolation and loneliness have a massive impact on wellbeing, but it is also about the place and the environment in which people live. I urge the Minister to look at some of the impressive projects in the Netherlands, building villages that are safe environments for older people. In Hogeweyk, a dementia village,

people have their independence, which keeps them on their feet, which then keeps them healthy, and they can move safely around a village environment while at the same time having a few people keeping an eye on them. Three or four people, at various stages of dementia, live in each house. There is a shop and a hairdressers on the complex, and other places that people can go, but it is a closed environment that keeps people safe. There are some good models out there of how we can build proper homes for life and ensure that people do not have the stress—we all know that moving home is stressful—of having to move at a fragile point in their life.

There is so much more we can do with this agenda if a real aspiration is there to change how we look at the complex dual issue of health and housing. Should Labour come into power in York in May, our plans are to build transformation, ensuring both that we have private rental sector licensing to drive up standards, and that we build the homes that people need in a healthy environment, place making as we go, so that everyone can enjoy the place where they live.

10.15 am

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What a pleasure it is to serve under the firm but fair chairmanship of your good self, Mr Robertson.

I will not be very political in my speech; I might make a couple of swipes at the Conservative Government about one little item that worries me. In 1963, the enlightened Conservative Government asked Sir Parker Morris to look at homes for then and for the future. He came up with a very good report that was accepted as guidance by that Government, but it was not until 1967 that a Labour Government made that guidance statutory in the Parker Morris standards for housing and homes. Those standards guided us well and provided a framework for the quality of our housing. People had to build according to those good standards—cavity wall insulation, the size of the living room, the size and accessibility of the toilet, and all the stuff we took for granted.

Unfortunately, in the 1980s another Conservative Administration abolished the Parker Morris standards. That was an age when a woman I knew very well—Margaret Thatcher—believed passionately in the private sector leading and delivering more effectively than the public sector. At that stage, when that was fashionable—I am not blaming anyone who is around today—the standards were abolished and we have suffered from that for many years.

I chair both the all-party parliamentary carbon monoxide group and Policy Connect. We have taken a strong interest in carbon monoxide, and it hits home hardest when one of your constituents is affected, especially if they die. A little 10-year-old boy, Dominic Rodgers, was found dead from carbon monoxide poisoning by his mother when she went to wake him for school, in a little terraced house in the middle of Huddersfield. The poisoning was not from that home but from a faulty boiler in the house next door. The silent killer had seeped, as it does, across the passageway and killed the little boy. A few months later, a couple who ran a Chinese restaurant were sleeping over the premises and they too died from carbon monoxide poisoning—a cowboy builder had blocked the chimney. Like all good campaigns, the carbon monoxide one started at the

constituency level, and I have been campaigning for many years with a very good all-party team to make people aware. The more research we do, the more we know that carbon monoxide issues are related to healthy homes.

As I said in my intervention on my very good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—what a good debate he has initiated—the fact of the matter is that there are two worrying sectors. Huddersfield is the average, classic British town on all the criteria; what happens in Huddersfield is a symbol of what is happening in the greater United Kingdom. We have two problems in the town, one of which is old social housing. Over the years, that housing has been progressively upgraded and renewed. The situation has not been helped by some of the poor effects and unintended consequences of right to buy, but social housing has a much better record than private rented accommodation regarding healthy homes and intervention to ensure that people live in a healthy, safe environment.

The real problem, in Huddersfield and elsewhere, is private rented accommodation. It is a sad fact that the standard of private accommodation is very variable. Until recently, many of the students who came to university towns—certainly my four children—found themselves living in rented accommodation that was pretty awful. A parent would not want their children living in accommodation of that quality, and they were certainly not healthy environments: I am talking about accommodation in Cambridge, Bristol and Edinburgh. However, we have had a revolution in the private rented sector for students. At one stage, I teased the housing Minister, because in Huddersfield we had cranes, new blocks, and wonderful, posh, modern accommodation for students. I kept asking the various housing Ministers who came and went, “If we can do that for students, why can we not build those sorts of buildings—modern, high-quality accommodation—for elderly people in our constituencies and in our country?”

The fact of the matter is that private rented accommodation is difficult, and one aspect of that difficulty arises when we want to look at smart metering. We want to go into a house to fit smart meters, in order to bring down the cost of energy and the amount of money that people on low incomes spend on heating. Getting in for that purpose, or to check whether there is a carbon monoxide detector or a smoke alarm, is very difficult in private accommodation. A lot of people do not want us to know how many people are living in that accommodation; they want to be private, which makes it difficult. We know that a high percentage of gas appliances in those rented homes are very dangerous indeed. They have not been serviced every year, and they could very well kill the people living in that accommodation.

I do not want to concentrate just on carbon monoxide, so I will finish my remarks by saying that this morning, when I was getting up early in order to speak in this debate at 9.30, I was startled when I turned on the radio to listen to the “Today” programme and heard someone from the housing sector—I have to say, a rather complacent person—being interviewed. Mr Robertson, as a working politician like me, you probably shout at the radio sometimes, because you want John or one of the other interviewers to really push a particular question. This morning, I wanted that representative of the housing

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

sector to answer this question: “What happened to the Help to Buy programme?” We know that that money did not flow into Northern Irish homes and housing, and it did not flow into homes and housing in my constituency: it flowed into the coffers of the big housing companies. We thought that those tens of millions of pounds were going to regenerate the market and provide homes for people who needed them, but it all went wrong. It is another bit of public policy that started with brave intentions and went awry. Those tens of millions of pounds could have been spent on investing in healthy homes, improving them and bringing them up to what was the Parker Morris standard.

That is the most political thing that I will say today. I have found that, across the House and in this very Chamber, there is a lot of consensus that there is a problem, and that the problem can be solved. However, we have to start focusing our energy and, for goodness’ sake, both parties need to show some real leadership in providing what people in this country deserve—great standards for homes and housing. The 1960s were pretty good for music; I think the Beatles’ first album came out in 1963. Some very good regulation and legislation also came out in the 1960s. I beg the Minister to listen to a bit more Beatles music, and to have a spring awakening to the fact that she has the ability and capacity to lead on this issue, providing healthy homes for all the people in this country who deserve them.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I remind the Front-Bench speakers that I would like to leave two minutes at the end of the debate for Mr Shannon to respond.

10.24 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, in what has been an interesting, consensual and informative debate that I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for having secured. All too often, we describe debates as important when they are not, but this debate is genuinely important, and it is good to see consensus about that across the Chamber. I thank the hon. Gentleman not just for his thorough opening speech, but for his work in chairing the all-party parliamentary group for healthy homes and buildings, and for the excellent report that it recently produced.

There is no doubt that housing is the foundation that connects people to their communities, or that healthy homes help empower full participation in community life. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, healthy homes lead to better educational attainment, higher workplace productivity, reduced emissions, lower energy bills and a lower carbon footprint—objectives that we would all unite in supporting. Poor housing, on the other hand, detrimentally contributes to physical and mental health inequalities through the effects of housing costs, housing quality, fuel poverty and the role of housing in community life, and many Members have provided examples and case studies that have helped to illustrate that point. Many people do not live in a home that is warm, dry and affordable, and those on the lowest incomes are most disproportionately affected. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made some good points about housing and fuel poverty, an issue that affects my constituency, and one that we should be doing a lot more to tackle in this modern age.

Income, wealth and the welfare system are undoubtedly at the heart of the relationship between housing and health inequalities. Poverty-related inequalities represent thousands of premature deaths every year. In Scotland, both housing and health are devolved. I have some Scottish figures that give a wee bit of flavour; they are pretty similar to those we have heard from Members from elsewhere in the UK. Figures from NHS Scotland show that men in the most deprived areas spend nearly 25 fewer years in good health than those in the least deprived areas; for women, the figure is 22 years. Housing clearly has the potential to reduce or reinforce those inequalities. In Scotland, all homes are required to meet the tolerable standard of habitability. It is estimated that 1% of all homes fell below that standard in 2017—that is down from 4% in 2012, so we are going the right way. Perhaps more worrying is that, as Members have mentioned, the private sector is lagging behind; the public sector is leading the way. Private homes, which are a different matter, are in between.

There is a lot of work that we need to do in all areas of housing tenure, and there are several linked factors in that, such as the number of properties available in an area. The quality of the homes is also a major factor—as is affordability, perhaps more importantly. In Scotland, the Scottish National party has delivered more than 76,500 affordable homes since 2007, and is investing more than £3 billion to deliver at least another 50,000 affordable homes during the current parliamentary Session. The Scottish Government continue to support the empty homes partnership, which has brought 3,200 empty homes back into use since 2010. There are empty homes all around our country that could be put to use in housing people. The Scottish Government have introduced the Fuel Poverty (Target, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Bill, which sets a target of no more than 5% of Scottish households being in fuel poverty by 2040. In my opinion, 5% is still too many, but if we can achieve that, it will be a step in the right direction.

Between 2007 and 2017, the average price of domestic fuel rose from £856 to £1,249 per annum—a rise of approximately 46%. That is a frightening figure over a decade; people’s wages certainly have not kept pace with that rise. Fuel poverty causes misery, ill health and debt, and living in a cold, damp environment can exacerbate health problems such as asthma and heart conditions, as a number of Members have mentioned. It is unacceptable in this modern age that any household should have to choose between heating and eating, yet people who are struggling to pay their bills often ration their use of energy, perhaps heating just one room, having to choose between cooking or heating their home, or limiting the use of washing machines and heating water for baths or showers, all of which can have an impact on people’s health and wellbeing. There is a correlation between fuel poverty and increased winter mortality, or excess winter deaths. Increased winter mortality is associated with low indoor temperatures, and the excess winter mortality figure for 2017-18 in Scotland was 4,800, a figure not significantly different from the English figures mentioned earlier.

To become a fairer and more just society, it is crucial that we end the scourge of fuel poverty. As technology moves forward, we should do a lot more on the “Big Mother” scenario, rather than the Big Brother scenario. Smart meters and other technology are growing all the time. It would not be impossible to have feedback from

people's homes on the temperature in their houses. Action could then be taken, particularly in areas where we know there are elderly people, or people with social conditions, to intervene and check why they are not heating their home properly. Perhaps we should even think about the health sector being able to prescribe heat. It may save money in the long run.

The worst housing position for anyone to find themselves in is homelessness. The health of people experiencing homelessness is significantly worse than that of the general population. The Library briefing provided for the debate highlighted a Local Government Association report that identified that 41% of homeless people have a long-term physical health problem, and 45% have a diagnosed mental health problem, compared with respective figures of 28% and 25% in the general population. That certainly fits with my experience locally; the people whom various homeless charities have been dealing with increasingly have mental health issues, as well as being homeless.

The last estimate of the healthcare cost associated with the homeless population was £86 million a year in 2010; the figure will undoubtedly be higher now. That shows that we can save money for the public purse by tackling homelessness. The Scottish Government are committed to eradicating rough sleeping in Scotland. They have allocated £21 million to rapid rehousing in the past year. The money came from their "ending homelessness together" fund. As a result of the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003, local authorities in Scotland have a duty to find permanent accommodation for all applicants who are unintentionally homeless. Last year, *The Guardian* reported that the National Audit Office had stated that homelessness is

"likely to have been driven by welfare reforms",

which brings us back to poverty, the issue at the heart of so much of the homelessness and housing issue.

It is not all bad news, though. A report authored by Crisis and PricewaterhouseCoopers estimated that allocating appropriate housing to homeless people improved their wellbeing, and increased economic output as a result of them entering employment. The same report stated that the Exchequer is projected to save a staggering £6,361 million as people are moved out of homelessness, through the reduced use of public services, ranging across everything from the NHS to criminal justice. We cannot afford to skimp on this. Austerity does not get us there. We need to spend money to save an absolute fortune by solving the problems.

Time is moving on, and there are so many aspects of the debate that I would have loved to have gone into. The debate is so wide-ranging, and the hon. Member for Strangford has picked a genuinely fascinating issue. I will touch briefly on overcrowding, which is at the opposite end of the homelessness spectrum. It has serious links to mental health, particularly for children and young people. Living in cramped conditions puts enormous pressure on family relationships. I have seen case studies in my constituency of marital break-ups and people forced to live with their extended family for an undue period. It causes depression, stress and anxiety. We need to tackle not only the extreme ends of the issue, but overcrowding. Fixing the housing problem is key to ensuring that everyone has their fundamental needs met and reducing pressure on our NHS. It can also bring in a huge amount of money for the public purse that we could put to better use.

10.33 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing forward this important debate on a critical issue related to housing. It is reflective of the crisis in housing. From the contributions we have heard today, it is painfully clear that alongside the families left waiting for social housing, the young people unable to get on the property ladder and the thousands of rough sleepers on our streets, the NHS is suffering as a result of an ongoing housing crisis in which one in three people in the UK live in poor-quality housing.

If we take a short trip down memory lane, we will recall that the last Labour Government's decent homes programme invested £22 billion and brought 1.4 million social homes up to a habitable standard. Contrast that with the position now: the English housing survey gave us data across the whole housing sector showing that 20% of homes in our country were considered non-decent in 2016. More than 500,000 social homes failed to meet the decent homes standard in 2017. That perhaps comes as no surprise when we consider that just £1.6 billion was spent on the decent homes programme between 2011 and 2015, when funding was stopped altogether, with the Government expecting councils, which are stretched to breaking, to pick up the pieces.

Cold and damp houses have a detrimental effect on health by increasing the risk of cardiovascular, respiratory and rheumatoid conditions. They can exacerbate the symptoms of arthritis and reduce dexterity among elderly people, thereby increasing the risk of falls. They cause mould, colds and flu. Being cold can impact a person's ability to cook, shower and clean.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) painted a clear picture of how poor housing also affects our mental health. Our homes are places where our children grow up, where we celebrate milestones and where we spend a great deal of our time, so it is completely understandable that the state of our houses can have such a detrimental effect on our mental health. Research by Shelter indicates that 20% of adults have experienced mental health issues in the past five years as a result of housing problems. Further research by the Sustain project has found that the physical condition of someone's home is strongly predictive of their mental health. According to Mind, people with a mental health condition are four times more likely to report that poor housing has made their health worse.

The Government's failure to build anywhere near enough new and appropriate homes—my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) recognises this only too well from her constituency—ends up in a direct cost to the NHS: unhealthy homes affect our mental and physical health, leading to increased pressure on the health service, whether that is on GP appointments, hospital bed spaces or carers. The NHS even has a diagnosis code for inadequate housing, which was listed as a secondary diagnosis in almost 3,500 hospital episodes in 2017-18. More than half were among those aged 65 or over.

Poor-quality housing has particularly disastrous effects on those on low incomes, many of whom lack the means to replace out-of-date boilers and central heating systems, or end up renting off unscrupulous landlords who let their homes fall into disrepair. My hon. Friend

[Melanie Onn]

the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) made some excellent points about the difficulty of getting private rented sector properties up to standard, and reminded us all of the dangers of the silent killer that is carbon monoxide poisoning, which can often happen in homes of a lower standard. Those things all inevitably lead to avoidable GP appointments and hospital stays.

The cost of the lack of accessible housing cannot be overstated. Elderly and vulnerable people across the country struggle every day in homes that do not meet their needs. As Members have pointed out, some cannot afford to heat their homes properly. Just 7% of homes have basic accessibility features. Those who feel they can no longer live safely or comfortably in their homes are forced into care homes at a cost to their family, the state and their independence.

According to the Royal College of Physicians, falls cost the NHS £2 billion every year. However, many falls are not the inevitable result of ageing and could be easily avoided by removing hazards around the home. Fitting grab rails in bathrooms, building houses with walls strong enough to support grab rails, making sure homes have level access and building stairs with an easy-going pitch are all cost-effective ways to avert extremely damaging falls. Research by the Building Research Establishment indicates that removing category 1 hazards that lead to falls would save more than £400 million every year and would pay for itself within just five years. If we make those changes pre-emptively, the number of hospital bed days lost due to delays in hospital discharge while a suitable home is found will be dramatically reduced.

One of my constituents is a nurse at Scunthorpe General Hospital. She reported to me that she routinely has patients in her care who are forced to wait in hospital for up to three weeks longer than they should for changes to be made to their homes, or for a carer to be assigned. My local hospital trust says that one of the worst things for patients, particularly elderly patients, is to be in hospital longer than they should be. They are at increased risk of infection, and unfortunately that increases mortality rates. That really brings home how important getting housing right at every stage is to individuals' life prospects, and NHS statistics reflect that.

An NHS annual report on delayed transfers of care in England in 2018 found that nearly 50,000 bed days were lost because of delayed discharges due to housing inadequacy, with patients waiting for major home adaptations, alternative housing arrangements, manual handling equipment such as a hoist, living equipment, a bed, deep cleaning, decorating, or basic decluttering.

The NHS is already on its knees. NHS doctors, nurses and workers deserve better than to be burdened by the failure of the Government to provide healthy homes. The Government cannot ignore the impact of their cuts to local government on the state of our housing. Environmental health departments have not been protected from very severe cuts, and many simply do not have the resources to enforce housing standards fully in their area. The hon. Member for Strangford raised concerns about people slipping out from under the microscope, and that is a prime example of ever-widening gaps in social policy. It is people, not statistics, who end up falling through those gaps.

The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), presents a real opportunity for tenants to take some control over their housing standards, but it will not replace the need for proper council enforcement, and the Government must consider whether cuts to local government truly offer value for money when they stop councils protecting tenants from unhealthy housing, and lead to less money in the pockets of our NHS.

We must take the health impact of our homes into account as we build for the future. The current state of affairs is unsustainable and places too much of the burden on the NHS. A change in the way that we build houses will reduce the cost of social care, give people a sense of independence, and allow the elderly to live an active lifestyle at home well into their 80s and 90s.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. We have had an excellent debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate on the cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS. He is a long-standing advocate of healthy housing, and his knowledge and passion about the subject has been evident today. Indeed, I congratulate all Members who have spoken. The 11 contributors spoke with passion about the links between housing and health. I acknowledge and commend the amount of work that the hon. Gentleman has undertaken on behalf of his constituents and the public as chair of the all-party group on healthy homes and buildings. He has provided welcome scrutiny of one of this Government's top priorities: safe, decent, housing. I have read the APPG's white paper with interest and will use this opportunity to respond to that as well as today's debate.

The APPG is carrying out very important work, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) on their roles as co-chairs of the APPG, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) on their work in the APPG.

I cannot speak to figures relating to the cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS, because that is not within my gift as the Minister for housing, but that does not mean that the Government do not acknowledge the cost of poor housing on health, and the cost is enough to justify driving through changes. Everyone deserves a decent and safe place to live, and we have seen clear improvements under this Government. The number of private rented homes failing to meet the decent homes standard is down 15% since 2010, which is a record low, and the number of social homes failing to meet the standard is down 32% since 2010: a near-record low.

However, the Government want more action to be taken, which is why our recent social housing Green Paper asks whether we should reconsider what constitutes a decent home. We supported the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, introduced by the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), which gives tenants the right to take legal action if landlords fail in their duties, freeing local authorities to focus on using their existing strong and effective powers against rogue landlords.

I want to speak about the actions that the Government are taking on each point of the system. Again, I congratulate all the Members who have contributed today. My Department is reviewing building safety regulations, mindful of the needs of people in fuel poverty and the importance of maintaining air quality in our homes, and we are working across Government to ensure an holistic approach to building regulations. To answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), we take the risks and consequences of carbon monoxide poisoning very seriously, which is why we committed to review carbon monoxide alarm requirements. I am pleased to say that the first stage of the review is complete and we have gathered information on the falling costs of alarms and on uncertainty about the fact that carbon monoxide poisonings are perhaps under-reported. We are now considering the updated evidence and will respond shortly.

Local authorities have strong powers under the Housing Act 2004 to tackle poor property conditions that might impact on people's health. They must take enforcement action where the most serious hazards are present, which are usually assessed through the housing health and safety rating system—the HHSRS, which I always have difficulty saying. Enforcement activity can range from informal work with the landlord to emergency repairs or even prohibition of the use of the whole or part of the property in extreme circumstances. The HHSRS is crucial to local authorities' enforcement of decent standards and thereby the protection of people's health. That is why on 26 October 2018 we announced that we were commissioning a review to assess how well the HHSRS works in practice and to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

To reply to the hon. Member for Strangford, in October we laid regulations to extend mandatory licensing of houses in multiple occupation, bringing a further 170,000 HMOs within scope. It is an important tool for preventing overcrowding and the harms associated with it. I again congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on her dedicated work on housing and her tenacity in fighting for her constituents.

Winter mortality is a result of many different factors, but it is clear that living in a cold home can lead to adverse outcomes for health and wellbeing. An investment of £3 billion a year demonstrates that it is not something that the Government take lightly. We have a comprehensive package of policies to support households over the winter months. All pensioner households receive winter fuel payments of £200 to £300, and more than 2 million low-income and vulnerable households receive a further £140 rebate through the warm home discount. Additional payments are made through the cold weather payment scheme during spells of cold weather. In addition, £640 million a year is currently available through the energy company obligation to upgrade homes, tackling fuel poverty in the long run.

Mr Sheerman: Can the Minister tell me what she thinks about going back to really firm standards, such as the Parker Morris standards? The review was originally a Conservative idea.

Mrs Wheeler: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on managing to mention Parker Morris at least three times in this debate. We are looking at future standards.

Sometimes we need smaller homes as starter homes, but equally we need better-quality homes all the way through. I will perhaps come on to that later in my speech.

The health impacts of cold homes and fuel poverty require action from a wide range of organisations across the health and social care sector. Partnership approaches are key. Local authorities are now able to work with the charitable and health sectors to determine which households should be eligible for support under a new flexible element of the £640 million-a-year energy company obligation energy efficiency scheme, which is focused on low-income and vulnerable households.

There has been significant improvement in the average energy efficiency of fuel-poor homes. The latest fuel poverty statistics showed that there were nearly 800,000 fewer fuel-poor properties rated E, F or G in 2016 compared with 2010. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives that the role of housing will be a crucial part of our considerations in the forthcoming social care Green Paper. I also note his pitch for a pilot. That shows that the policies are working to help those living in the least efficient homes, who can least afford to keep warm.

There is no doubt that it is essential that buildings are well ventilated, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield mentioned, for the health of the people in the building, and the health of the building itself. It is not merely a means to resolve overheating, but a matter of air quality. For that reason, part F of the building regulations sets minimum requirements to provide adequate means of ventilation. As set out in the Government's clean air strategy, we plan to consult in spring 2019

“on changes to standards in Part F of the Building Regulations relating to ventilation in homes and other buildings.”

In setting minimum ventilation standards, we take advice from across Government on indoor air quality, including from the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Public Health England. Indoor air quality is a complex issue, and many factors determine the concentration of pollutants in a space. Ventilation is one such factor, but outdoor air quality, the location of the building, emissions from products and the activities of occupants in the building all play a role as well.

Health and wellbeing can be affected by what is outside as well as inside a home. The revised national planning policy framework therefore includes a dedicated chapter that deals with the creation of healthy and safe places. It states:

“Planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which...promote social interaction...are safe and accessible...and support healthy lifestyles”.

At my Department's recent national design quality conference in Birmingham, attended by more than 400 representatives of the community and housing sector, we had a dedicated session on healthy place-making, and we recognised the importance of creating places that have a positive impact on health and wellbeing. On that matter, too, there is extensive cross-Government collaboration. As the hon. Member for Strangford is aware, my Department has been part of the NHS England healthy new towns programme and sits on the steering group. I hope that he will be pleased to hear that in 2019-20, NHS England will build on that by working with the Government to develop a healthy new

[Mrs Wheeler]

towns standard, including a healthy homes quality mark to be awarded to places that meet high standards and principles that promote health and wellbeing.

The Government recognise the importance of having safe and healthy homes and buildings, and provide common definitions and approaches to regulation and standards, consistently striving to ensure that they remain up to date and effective. MHCLG has taken the lead on many aspects, from undertaking a comprehensive review of building safety to strengthening consumer redress. There is extensive cross-Government work on healthy homes and buildings, from planning and place-making to design, delivery and standards and support. Again, we take on board the comment about Parker Morris.

Officials across all policy areas regularly engage across all levels of Government, industry and the third sector. For example, we are an active signatory of the memorandum of understanding on improving health and care through the home. That joins us up with 25 other signatories, including the NHS, the Local Government Association and the Royal Society for Public Health. We have positive relationships with our counterparts in the devolved Administrations, but always welcome the opportunity to deepen engagement.

Perhaps the APPG for healthy homes and buildings is the place to examine which specific relationships could be strengthened. However, the responsibility for ensuring that homes and buildings are safe and healthy is a shared one, lying with product designers, developers, building owners and managers and local authorities, as well as central Government and devolved Administrations. That is why the work that the hon. Member for Strangford has undertaken through the APPG is so valuable, and why Ministers from my Department would be pleased to meet the group, to ensure that no stone is left unturned in our mission to make the housing market fit for everyone.

10.53 am

Jim Shannon: I thank everyone for their valuable contributions. As the Minister said, it has been a constructive debate. Everyone who contributed, whether with a speech or an intervention, added important information.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) referred to removing people from fuel poverty, winter deaths, delivering social care, and how children learn better in warm homes. My hon. Friends the Members for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and for Upper Bann (David Simpson), and the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), focused in their interventions on social housing and socioeconomic issues. Health and housing cannot be divorced, as the debate has reinforced.

The hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) referred to how house deterioration makes people physically and mentally ill, and to the issue of rogue landlords, which the Minister also mentioned. Tenants are at their wits' end. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) referred to 200 homes with water rising under the floorboards. She is clearly in touch with her constituents when it comes to raising the standard and condition of older homes. She referred to the APPG for ageing and older people, and security in later life, which is important.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) referred to carbon monoxide and cowboy builders. Old homes need to be upgraded, but social housing, private rented accommodation, student accommodation and smoke alarms are also all critical issues. The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), the Scottish National party spokesperson, spoke of the debate's importance, and how homes must be warm, dry and affordable. He gave us a Scottish perspective on the issues. Again, overcrowding, pressure and family relationships are so important. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), described how many homes are not up to standard. She talked about low incomes, renting from disreputable landlords, health and infections in homes. Those issues are all important.

I thank the Minister for responding so well to all our contributions and questions. It is always a pleasure to be in her company, and it was a pleasure to hear her response to the points that we made on cold homes, healthy place-making, and safe, decent housing. She responded by showing her commitment to those issues. I am very pleased that she suggested a meeting. It is very clear to me that on safety regulations, she answered the questions regarding healthy homes and buildings.

I thank the secretariat of the APPG for healthy homes and buildings, who are in the Gallery, for their valuable contribution to making this happen, and to the white paper inquiry and its conclusions. We have all contributed to a very important debate on healthy homes and buildings and the NHS. There is so much more that we can do. Today we demonstrated to the Minister, singularly and collectively, that there is so much more that we can do. We are all committed, alongside the Minister, to ensuring that we deliver on that.

Again, I thank all Members for their contributions, and for being here on a Tuesday morning. It is such a pleasure to be here on a Tuesday morning, rather than at 3.30 on a Thursday afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cost of unhealthy housing to the NHS.

Animal Rescue Homes

10.57 am

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regulation of animal rescue homes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the Minister for attending this debate, on an issue of great importance to our constituencies.

Many MPs will, like me, have rescue centres in their constituencies, serving to protect animals who have been abandoned or whose owners cannot look after them due to ill health. Such centres offer an invaluable service to communities across the UK, especially as we are a nation well known for our love of animals and pets. It is estimated that our pet population last year was an incredible 9 million dogs and 8 million cats. That means that an estimated 44% of households own a pet.

However, with so many pets across the country, sometimes things go wrong. For various reasons, an estimated 250,000 animals go to rescue centres each year. In their time of need, we expect those animals to receive the best possible care, and thankfully the vast majority do. I have had the pleasure of visiting some such rescue centres, and we all appreciate the amazing work that they carry out across the sector. Their work is invaluable, and it is a testament to the passion that those working in the field have for animal welfare that a great many of them do so voluntarily. Visiting Battersea Dogs and Cats Home recently brought into sharp relief for me the impact of rescue shelters and rehoming shelters, not just because of the high value that is placed on animal welfare, but because of the social impact of such well-run centres. In each of the clean and well-maintained rooms was a story. Some were sad—some made my heart ache—but I left there happy that day. I was happy that all the animals in the care of Battersea were being looked after to the highest of standards and by people who had the interests of the animals at heart.

My own cat, Lucky, who I got just over two years ago, was rescued from a building site by Cats Protection. I got to meet the amazing foster mum who was looking after him and other cats in her home. It was heart-warming to see the love and commitment from a volunteer, who helps cats to socialise and supports those who desperately need a home.

Although we have fantastic organisations and volunteers doing great work, there are some that take advantage of the lack of regulation or are simply not equipped to manage the welfare of already vulnerable and distressed animals. Without regulation, animals may not be adequately checked for diseases, they may live in cramped and overcrowded conditions and they may not be given the tailored support vulnerable animals need. It is often only after many complaints or accusations that the issue of competence or regulation is ever raised.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I am delighted that this debate is taking place. I visited Battersea Dogs and Cats Home only yesterday and came away with a very positive impression. I have been supporting the idea of reintroducing dog licensing, so that we know where dogs are, which would help to deal with any problems, but it was brought to my attention that when introducing

legislation, we want to be awfully careful not to drive things underground. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to tread carefully as we consider introducing legislation?

Jo Platt: I will come on to the Government consultation later; smaller charities and those who do this work voluntarily, without the shelter of a larger organisation, do have concerns, and legislation is about supporting those people as well. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

We know that good guidance and transparency works. Membership of the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes has raised standards in rescue centres—I am pleased to have seen the work of such organisations at first hand—but that is sadly not the case for a large number of shelters and refuges across the country. When I tried to research how many rescue centres operate in the UK and how many face any regulation or scrutiny at all, the statistics were simply not there. Nobody had any idea. I asked each local authority in England how many centres operated in their districts. About half of the councils that responded did not know how many rescue homes they had in their area. In those that did, only 18% of shelters had any regulation at all, through their voluntary membership of the ADCH—although the vast majority of those not taking part in the self-regulation scheme are beyond reproach in their efficacy and attention to the welfare of animals in their care.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Recently, the Blue Cross reported an increase in rescue centres that import dogs from abroad and sell them to members of the public. They are obviously not genuine rescue centres. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government need to discourage that practice and ensure that only genuine rescue centres are recognised?

Jo Platt: I absolutely agree. There is an issue of understanding what we are dealing with—how many people are opening up as refuge centres and sanctuaries, and how many are doing that voluntarily. There are people who are probably not getting the support they need to look after vulnerable animals.

I have heard some truly horrific stories, and formal regulation is now surely necessary to ensure that the care of all animals is of the highest standards, regardless of their circumstances. I am particularly pleased that in the Government's recent consultation on third-party sales of pets, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recognised the deficiency in animal rescue centre regulation. I understand that 90% of respondents agreed that there needed to be regulation. With a constructive approach, I hope we can work together on this important issue to make regulation work in the best interests of pet welfare.

When I previously asked DEFRA why rescue homes are not licensed, the answer was that smaller charities or single volunteers would struggle. That is a legitimate concern, but not one without solutions. We need to collect data on the number of rescue homes operating. We must also assess the impact any regulations will have on local authorities. Cuts to central funding often currently impair local councils from providing enforcement on a range of civil matters, and legislation for animal shelters must make provision to ensure that, where concerns are

[Jo Platt]

raised or scrutiny of provision is required, the regulatory body responsible has the necessary tools to ensure best practice is maintained.

Any licensing regime must also ensure that applications are from those with the right skills, dedication and resourcing to protect the long-term welfare of the animals. Community operators, often with a small number of animals in their charge, also provide immediate and ongoing care for animals in need and are extremely valuable, both in terms of the service they provide for animals and in their wider community. However, they should not be simply exempt from a requirement to be recognised and regulated. In such cases, perhaps an accreditation to a larger organisation would negate the possibility of smaller groups being unable to function with the additional regulations.

I have laid out just a few of the areas that I hope we can work on, across party lines, to put animal welfare first. As a nation of dedicated animal lovers, I am sure that is what our constituents expect from us. The Minister can count on my support and that of many others in realising a new regulatory framework for animal shelters and rescue centres that protects our most vulnerable animals and gives the public confidence that animals are receiving the best possible care in all cases. Animals who are in need of shelter or need to find a new home should be expected to receive good care regardless of which organisation provides it.

One thing is uniting the animal charity sector—they all agree that regulation is urgently needed. Cats Protection say that regulation would provide transparency, helping to ensure consistent and high welfare for animals within sanctuaries or rehoming centres. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals points out that without regulation the forthcoming ban on third-party sales could result in current third parties disguising themselves as rescue centres to evade regulation, and warns how easy that would be, as some pet shops already operate charitable arms. It concludes that the regulation of rescue centres is the best option, a view reiterated by the majority of rescue centres I have spoken and met, despite the additional burden it would place on them.

Ultimately, if animal welfare is their guiding motivation, rescue centres will always welcome measures to ensure they are doing all they can to help the animals they look after. That is why we must build on the work of the ADCH, with its incredibly robust framework that strives to drive up standards in animal welfare. It provides a strong basis and starting point for the regulation needed, as well as the support network to promote best practice and assist member organisations to continually raise their levels of care.

I hope that in answering the debate this morning the Minister can update us on the progress of the consultation, outline a timetable in which regulation could be introduced and commit to working together in the interests of animal welfare and the sector as a whole. What has become clear to anyone looking at this issue is that we must regulate and license animal shelters and rescue homes to ensure adequate levels of care. We must close the loophole that would allow third-party dealers to pose as shelters to evade the ban, and we must provide the resourcing and powers to give real teeth to any regulatory

system. I look forward to hearing the plans to finally make that happen and recommit my support to any efforts to ensure that this is a system that does justice to our incredible rescue centres.

11.8 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) for securing this debate on a subject that I know is very dear to the hearts of many people, and is particularly close to her heart. I respect the amount of hard work she has put into fully understanding this subject and into pressing for further action, for which she is to be commended. I am also grateful for the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), with his particular interest in the subject, and my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns).

The hon. Member for Leigh has set out clearly her concerns about regulation of animal rescue and rehoming centres. She has sincerely and strongly held views, and I agree that we must do everything we can to ensure that good welfare practices are in place in all animal rescue homes. With that in mind, I recognise that the vast majority of animal rescue homes up and down the country are legitimate, and I pay tribute to the valuable work they do in rescuing and rehoming thousands of sick, abandoned and stray animals each year. The work of rescue homes can too easily be taken for granted, and we should remember that most people working at them are volunteers who are incredibly dedicated to the welfare of the animals in their care.

The RSPCA, the Dogs Trust and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home have been referred to on a number of occasions. I was fortunate enough to visit Battersea just before Christmas, when we announced the third-party sales ban. Redwings Horse Sanctuary and World Horse Welfare are also well known to us, as is Cats Protection. They do a brilliant job of caring for and rehoming animals in a responsible and dedicated manner. We can be confident that the animals in these organisations are looked after to the very highest welfare standards, as the hon. Member for Leigh pointed out.

We should not forget that the smaller and lesser-known rescue homes also do really important work in taking care of unwanted and stray animals. The Government value the work of these legitimate, committed animal rescue homes. Without them, many animals would face abandonment and an uncertain future. From our preliminary work exploring this sector with the various bodies that have an interest, we know there is a large and diverse animal rescue and rehoming sector in the UK.

The hon. Member for Leigh indicated the findings of her research. We estimate that those organisations rescue and rehome somewhere in the region of 140,000 cats, 110,000 dogs and 3,000 horses per year. There are various types of organisations that operate according to different models. In addition to their relative size and the types of animals they rehome, one of the main differences between organisations is whether they care for animals in one central place or rely on other people to provide foster care for their animals. It is important to understand this distinction, because their regulation could be very different. We know that the majority of

those organisations are registered charities, which means that they meet the requirements set by the Charity Commission—for example, in respect of their finances.

For some rehoming centres, membership of the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes brings key benefits. The chair of the ADCH is Claire Horton, who I am sure is well known to many hon. Members present. She is the chief executive of Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and a member of the Animal Health and Welfare Board for England, which reports to Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Under Claire's skilled chairing, ADCH has developed clear good practice guidelines for the sector and encouraged more centres to come under its influence. I encourage other rehoming centres that are not members of ADCH to consider joining it for the benefits and advice that are available.

The hon. Member for Leigh set out her clear concerns about some rehoming centres and the need for them to be regulated. I agree that, sadly, some rescue homes, for whatever reason, fall below an acceptable standard of welfare. As with any keeper of animals, animal rescue homes must provide for the welfare needs of their animals, as required by the Animal Welfare Act 2006, but they are not licensed in the same way as dog breeding or pet shops. In February 2018 we issued a call for evidence on our proposal to ban the commercial third-party sale of puppies and kittens. In response, many stakeholders pointed out that we should also consider closer regulation of rescue homes, as the hon. Lady pointed out. Their argument was that we need to address concerns about animal welfare standards in some unscrupulous rescue homes, and to address concerns that third-party sellers would simply set up as rescue homes to avoid proposed bans. The Government definitely share those concerns.

Giles Watling: The Minister mentioned unscrupulous rescue homes; are not many rescue homes set up by well-meaning people who want to do the very best, but who suddenly become overwhelmed by the number of animals they take on board? It is more to do with outreach—getting in touch with these people to inform and educate them, so that we can help them to run a proper home, rather than their filling their houses with many animals that they cannot manage.

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Most of these homes—the vast majority—are set up with good intentions in mind, and sometimes those setting them up can be overwhelmed. However, there is support available, and in the months ahead we need to ensure that it is readily available and understood.

It is worth responding to the point on dog licensing made by the hon. Member for Leigh. We stopped dog licensing in 1988 due to low compliance. Those countries that have dog licensing schemes invariably still have low compliance rates. We have found it much more effective to rely on compulsory microchipping, and our focus is on increasing its uptake.

The consultation on the third-party sale ban, which we took forward in August 2018, attracted nearly 7,000 responses, and we published the summary of responses in December 2018. As a result of concerns being expressed similar to those articulated by the hon. Member for Leigh, the summary of responses document makes it clear that we will bring in a ban on third-party sellers of puppies and kittens as soon as possible. The

document also made it clear that we would undertake further consultations with key stakeholders, such as welfare charities, vets and local authorities, on the idea of licensing rescue and rehoming centres, with a particular focus on centres that rescue and rehome dogs, cats and horses.

The Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, which came into force in October, already require licensing of commercial pet sellers, dog breeders and certain other activities involving animals. The regulations provide the tools for regulating rescue and rehoming centres. We would need to set out the necessary specific conditions for such centres, which the sector is happy to help develop. However, I want to make it clear that in regulating this sector, we need to be confident of the benefits and the impacts, particularly on some of the smaller rescue and rehoming charities, which is why we are exploring these issues with the organisations involved. The hon. Member for Leigh alluded to that in her speech, and I hope she will understand that we are taking some time to ensure that we get our approach to the various aspects of the sector absolutely right.

The RSPCA is a member of the ADCH. The charity says that in the past eight years it has investigated some 11 individuals and obtained 80 convictions against five persons involved in animal rescue. A further two people received a caution. These cases involved a total of over 150 animals of different species, including dogs, cats, horses, farm animals and birds. This is despite the ongoing assistance that the RSPCA gives to failing establishments to ensure that they meet the needs of the animals under their care. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton alluded to the fact that support was required. The RSPCA does fantastic work in this area, which can involve years of work in providing advice and education to the same establishment. Sometimes those organisations fall foul of the law, which is when the RSPCA can get involved, as can local authorities in some cases.

Although regulation could benefit the rehoming sector and, importantly, the welfare of animals involved, we must remember the work and contributions of smaller rescue centres, which in the vast majority of cases do all they can to promote the welfare of animals in their care. Many of these centres are not members of ADCH, and we are discovering that there are likely to be hundreds out there. The latest estimates indicate that there are over 1,000 organisations operating in England that rehome and rescue dogs, cats and equines. In a way, that fits with the analysis that the hon. Member for Leigh obtained through her freedom of information request.

Clearly, we are dealing with many hundreds of these organisations. DEFRA is working with them and other welfare organisations to build a better understanding of the issues for smaller organisations. We want to work with them to improve the standards of welfare in those that are operating genuinely with the best intentions. More can be done to address the work of well-intentioned rehoming centres in the context of puppy imports. I have zero tolerance for unscrupulous dealers—I am sure the hon. Member for Leigh and other hon. Members share my view—who clearly abuse the pet travel scheme to traffic underage puppies into the UK. These puppies travel long journeys in very poor conditions and are not effectively protected against serious diseases, such as rabies and tapeworm, which pose a risk to their health

[David Rutley]

as well as to that of other animals and people. These puppies spend their early weeks of life facing unacceptable welfare and health conditions, and we must put a stop to this.

A key aspect of tackling puppy smuggling and assisting rehoming centres in their work is helping the public better to understand how to responsibly purchase or adopt a puppy and raising awareness of puppy smuggling. Through the umbrella body, the Canine and Feline Sector Group, we are in early discussions with key stakeholders on the development of a behaviour change campaign. I strongly believe that a unified message across Government and respected non-governmental organisations can have a real impact, and I look forward to working together with our partners and hon. Members to achieve this. We can work with them to share our early understanding of this and develop a better approach, and I look forward to engaging with them on this issue.

We must also guard against those who might be tempted to set up a rescue and rehoming operation with the primary intention of profiting from the public's appetite for pets, and effectively operating a pet-selling business, rather than a genuine rescue and rehoming charity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood said. Pet-selling businesses should be regulated under the animal activity licensing regulations introduced in October 2018. We will help local authorities with clear guidance to help them distinguish between those selling pets and genuine rehoming centres.

The Government have made it clear that we take animal welfare very seriously. We have a clear, positive action plan and have followed it up with a series of plans and actions, including updating and improving the laws on the licensing of certain animal-related activities, increasing the maximum penalties for animal cruelty, banning third-party sales of puppies and kittens, and looking at the options for licensing rehoming centres to ensure all rescue homes meet good standards of animal welfare. We will take the steps necessary to address the concerns relating to the regulation of rehoming centres and animal rescue centres. I thank the hon. Member for Leigh for securing this debate and for giving us the opportunity to debate these important issues.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

Global Education for the Most Marginalised

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered global education for the most marginalised.

It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I thank all hon. Members for their attendance this afternoon. These days—and today of all days—it feels like our focus is relentlessly on Brexit, yet there are other pressing issues on the agenda. I am particularly grateful to fellow members of the all-party parliamentary group on global education for their support and for being here this afternoon. I thank RESULTS UK for its excellent and informative briefing ahead of this debate. I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, specifically to the fact that I took part in a delegation to Tanzania in September 2017. It is largely my experience in Tanzania and the work of the Send My Friend to School campaign that motivated me to apply for this debate.

Some folk watching are probably wondering why the MP for Glasgow East was in Tanzania, not Tollcross, just a few months after a narrowly fought election contest during the general election. It was precisely because of my experience during the general election that I wanted to dedicate some of my time as an MP to international development and advocating for the most disadvantaged in our world. During the election campaign, I faced a number of relatively hostile questions about the 0.7% target. I was asked why we bothered with international aid. Some folk even reeled off soundbites such as, "Charity begins at home." As a first-time candidate, I was faced with an instant dilemma: did I keep my head down and just nod along, agreeing with those uninformed, right-wing, reactionary arguments, or did I stand up and speak out, demanding that children in eastern Africa get the same level of education as my children in Glasgow East? During my time in Tanzania, my eyes were truly opened to the shocking educational inequality that the world faces.

Before I come on to the substance of my remarks, it will be useful to set the scene and provide a bit of context about my concerns and why I applied for this debate. We know from UNESCO data that 262 million children and young people are unable to access education; that 387 million children of primary school age do not achieve the minimum proficiency levels in reading; that twice as many girls as boys never start school; that half of all children with disabilities in low and middle-income countries do not go to school; and that refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than their non-refugee peers. Crucially, many of the furthest-behind children experience several factors of marginalisation at the same time, in overlapping and reinforcing ways, which increases their exclusion.

Girls in conflict-affected countries are almost two and a half times more likely to be out of school than those in countries that are not in conflict. The poorest children are four times more likely not to go to school than the richest. That is an incredibly stark statistic. We

all agree that education is a universal human right, but due to inequality, millions of children are still locked out of education simply because of who they are and where they live. Members of Parliament would not countenance the idea that the children in the poorest parts of our constituencies do not go to school while those in more affluent polling districts get an education, but on a larger scale that is essentially what is happening in the world today.

In 2017, I had the privilege of joining a parliamentary delegation to Tanzania alongside the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and Lord Watts. I want to reflect on some of what I saw on the ground as I travelled through Dodoma, Sigita and Dar es Salaam. To understand better the challenges we face in global education, let us drill down and see why such inequality in education persists. First, unequal education systems around the world perpetuate and reinforce inequality, as the critical early years of education are neglected in development, humanitarian and crisis settings. Put simply, schools that serve disadvantaged communities, despite the fact that they have the greatest needs, have the poorest teaching and learning environments because they are under-resourced and under-supported. Disadvantaged communities are more likely to suffer from a shortage of schools and only have schools that are of the poorest infrastructure quality. Basic things such as a lack of sanitary provision at schools means that there are further consequences for young female students, in particular.

Secondly, inadequate domestic resources mean that education systems are under-financed. Far too many Governments still fail to meet the internationally recommended allocation of 15% to 20% of total public expenditure allocated to education. Education budgets are often spent without enough sensitivity and attention to reaching the furthest-behind groups. That often creates a situation in which households have to bear the significant financial burden of paying fees to send their children to school. Fees remain a major barrier to education for the world's poorest. We need greater and more effective international financing, as aid to education is stagnating. In short, domestic and international education financing should be underpinned by progressive universalism and expanding provision for all, while focusing on the furthest behind.

Thirdly, many children are locked out of learning because their identities are culturally devalued or because of a lack of political representation. Discrimination can be explicit through laws and policies that exclude certain groups of children from learning, such as national education systems that prevent refugee children's access to education, or implicit through social and cultural norms, such as taboos and myths about menstruation, which prevent girls from attending school, or the perception that children with disabilities are unable to learn.

I was appalled to learn that young girls in Tanzania miss at least one month of the school year due to menstruation. According to the Netherlands Development Organisation's baseline survey report on schoolgirls' menstrual hygiene management, about 84% of schools have no hand-washing facilities. Village girls either use inappropriate materials to manage menstrual flow or simply miss school altogether. We see period poverty on a massive scale, with hugely detrimental consequences.

Many girls struggle to complete their studies because of teenage pregnancies. A 2010 reports from the United Nations stated that about 8,000 Tanzanian girls per year are forced to leave school due to teenage pregnancy. We know from experience how difficult it is for them to return.

I want to turn to children with disabilities. When I visited a school in the Bahi district, I witnessed a child with a hearing impairment sitting at the very back of the class with no hearing aid. I questioned the logic of that with the teacher. There are also issues relating to how we resource teachers, and the training and resources they get. For example, Bahi Makulu Primary School had 804 pupils and just 12 teachers, whose training was extremely limited, not least regarding additional support needs provision.

Fourthly, there are issues relating to accountability. Unless decision makers are held accountable for the progress of the most marginalised in education, the learning crisis will persist. Accountability for the most marginalised children in education is difficult, given that there are few countries that collect sufficient data to identify and track the children who are falling furthest behind. Too many children remain invisible in datasets, including children in conflict and crisis-affected contexts, and children with disabilities. Decision makers must commit to collecting more data and using it to map how inequalities intersect and overlap, and to plan interventions and investment accordingly.

Having comprehensively set the scene, I want to turn to the action we should take. I commend the schools in the east end in my constituency and those right across the UK that will be joining Send My Friend to School in its "Unlock Education for Everyone" campaign by creating paper keys depicting the inequality in education around the world. They will present those keys to Members of Parliament and will call on the UK Government to unlock education for everyone.

That brings me nicely to some of my asks of the Minister. I sent them to her in advance, so I am not just about to bombard her with lots of questions. What can the British Government do? I believe that they should reaffirm and champion the "leave no one behind" pledge in education and lead on its implementation. They should also use international meetings and events, including the G7, G20 and the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, to press other Governments and international organisations to take action to address intersecting inequalities in education. In determining global policy, we should engage and collaborate with disadvantaged and marginalised children and their families at the grassroots level. That should include engagement with teachers and their unions, developing partners and networks, including the organisations that represent local people, and locally based community groups.

On our work with other countries, the UK Government should work with developing-country partner Governments and other key stakeholders to support inclusive gender and disability-responsive education sector plans and budgets, to ensure that no child or young person is left behind. For our part, we should ensure that all UK-funded education programmes, including development and humanitarian programmes, disaggregate data by age, socioeconomic status, gender, immigration and disability, and where possible, by ethnicity and locality.

[David Linden]

We should also build measures for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of programmes in addressing intersecting inequalities in all education programmes. That should include specific measures to evaluate their impact in including and providing quality education to the marginalised. We should also promote the importance of holistic, cross-Government and cross-sectoral commitment and action to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4, particularly across Ministries of education, finance, gender, health and child protection, in tandem with civil society.

When it comes to ensuring that we invest equitably, the Government should commit to increasing financing for education and ensuring that it reaches the hardest to reach. That can be done, for example, by renewing and increasing the UK's commitment to Education Cannot Wait. We could support the inclusive education initiative and advocate for additional donors to support the fund. We should support the Global Partnership for Education financially and through critical engagement with its governance and operations.

We should encourage any new mechanisms in the education financing architecture that would deliver on the "leave no one behind" education pledge, including through adopting equity-based stepping-stone targets. We should accelerate progress for hard-to-reach adolescent girls through continued support for the girls' education challenge and by strengthening its approach to addressing intersecting inequalities.

Having set out that long list of asks and questions for the Government, I will round off, not with clunky data or questions, but with a case study. Aquira is head girl at her community school in rural Zambia. She says:

"When I was younger, my uncle took me to Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, and his wife made me into a maid. I did the housework, cooking, and looked after their children. After some time, I was 10 years old and I contacted my mum and said Uncle wasn't taking me to school so she said she would come and get me. But my Uncle refused."

Aquira was eventually able to return to school, after contacting her mother again, but she continues to face obstacles. She says:

"Sometimes, I stopped coming to school because of money."

Aquira faces many barriers in her education journey, including a rural location, gender discrimination, employment and fees. None the less, she is supported by her family and her community to go to school, so she can realise her dream of becoming a nurse. That is Aquira's story.

Hon. Members have perhaps noticed that I have been wearing a rather wonderful tartan tie throughout the debate. It is the school tie of Mount Vernon Primary School in my constituency. I have visited that school on a number of occasions and I know that the children there receive a first-class education, which they get because we as a society have chosen to invest in their education and provide them with the resources that they need. The distance from Mount Vernon Primary School to Aquira's school in Zambia is well over 7,600 miles, but in an educational sense, they are probably even further apart.

My message to the Government today is crystal clear: let us get to a place where children like Aquira receive the same high-quality education as the children at Mount Vernon who proudly wear these ties. With political will

and the support of hon. Members, as well as that of our constituents, that is not an unachievable aim, but one towards which we should all be proud to work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4 o'clock. I am obliged to call the Front Benches no later than 3.27 pm, when the SNP, Her Majesty's Opposition and the Minister will each have 10 minutes. David Linden will have three minutes at the end to sum up. Until 3.27 pm, we will hear Back-Bench speeches. We will start with Henry Smith.

2.44 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me in this important debate on global education for the most marginalised. It is a pleasure, once again, to serve under your chairmanship. In the light of those time constraints, I will attempt to be brief. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate and on the powerful message in his speech.

Earlier this month, I received an email from the assistant headteacher of Northgate Primary School in my constituency, to let me know that, like many schools up and down the UK, it will take part in the Send My Friend To School campaign this year. The school has invited me to its year 5 assembly in support of that cause. I was delighted to accept the invitation and I look forward to meeting the pupils and teachers at the school in a few weeks' time. I will share with them a copy of *Hansard* so that they can read this debate for themselves.

Half of all children with disabilities in low and middle-income countries do not go to school at all. I know that I am not alone in my experience of visiting schools in the developing world—the hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned our visit to Tanzania with RESULTS UK—and I echo the concern about the many children, particularly those with disabilities such as visual or hearing impairments, who are often at the back of a very large classroom. I have seen classrooms of over 100 students where those with special educational needs are marginalised. They really need to be at the front, especially in a classroom environment that would be challenging for any of us given the numbers involved. There is also more deliberate exclusion, with certain groups of children sometimes being blocked by laws and policies restricting their access to education, as we heard in the introductory speech.

Northgate Primary in my constituency and hundreds of other schools across the UK are supporting the call to "unlock education for everyone". Through its support for the Global Partnership for Education and the Girls' Education Challenge, the UK has supported 11.4 million children, including 40,000 girls with disabilities, to gain a decent education. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State places a high importance on the role of education, and I urge her to continue to ensure that the UK Government use forums such as the G7, G20, the UN and others, to keep this matter at the forefront.

It must never be forgotten that UK aid is of course British taxpayers' money. UK support for education in the developing world goes far beyond what the Government can do. My constituency of Crawley is home to Vision

Aid Overseas, which, for more than 30 years, has helped some of the world's poorest people to see more clearly. Their Christmas appeal last year exceeded its target of raising £50,000 to help provide school-based eye health services across Ethiopia, Zambia and Sierra Leone to over 180,000 children. Crawley can be proud of the contribution that a locally based charity is making globally.

Vision Aid Overseas has been supported by the Department for International Development, with a three-year project to help improve the livelihoods and educational outcomes of adults and children across rural Ethiopia—a country where up to 10% of children have easily correctable vision problems. More than 184,000 patients were screened during the programme, with almost 15,000 of them receiving glasses and over 5,000 being referred for minor surgery. The organisation also trained more than 700 teachers to be able to identify common eye issues in their students, which has resulted in more than 2,500 children who previously struggled to see receiving new prescription glasses. Almost three quarters of children surveyed at the conclusion of the programme showed an improvement in their grades, reaffirming that promoting eye health in schools can improve children's attainment in a tangible way.

That is only one example, but a reminder of what can be done to support and empower some of the poorest and most marginalised. Up and down the UK, such efforts are being made by groups such as Vision Aid Overseas in my constituency.

I hope that the students of Northgate Primary School in Crawley will be able to look at this debate to see how seriously we are taking this issue across the House. Schools in this country realise the importance of ensuring that all young people get a chance of an education, which will better help a more secure and prosperous world for all our futures.

2.50 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate off the back of a new report from the Send My Friend to School coalition. One of the recommendations in the report is:

“Ensure Official Development Assistance to education is free from commercial interests, does not support for profit providers, and ensures education is free and universally available at the point of use.”

On that basis, I want to use this opportunity to add to the debate by speaking about the people I met in Nairobi, as their voices are not in the room.

Last year, while in Nairobi, I heard at first hand from parents and teachers about the problems they face with low-fee private schools. Parents spoke about unaffordable fees, and teachers spoke about poor labour standards. The situation was so extreme that they felt driven to lodge a complaint with the World Bank about Bridge International. The report findings are echoed by the International Development Committee. Its inquiry into DFID's education work expressed concerns about the inability of Bridge to reach the poorest and most marginalised children, and questioned the sustainability of the costs of providing education in that way.

Supporting a model that leaves out the poorest and most marginalised means that we would fail in our commitments under the SDGs to ensure that no one is left behind. I am pleased that DFID no longer uses official development assistance to fund Bridge schools, but I want reassurance. First, do the Government agree with Labour that that model of low fee for-profit education is not the way to deliver education to the most marginalised children? Secondly, will the Minister, in her summing up, guarantee that the Government will commit to not supporting such education models in future?

I welcome the recommendations of the new Send My Friend to School report, in particular the one calling on the Government to ensure that education ODA is “free from commercial interests” and does not support for-profit providers, and that

“education is free and universally available at the point of use.”

I recognise that children in the global south deserve the same standards that we expect for our children in the UK.

As I come to a close, I will echo what the hon. Member for Glasgow East said. I too believe that no one in this debate would disagree that all children in the UK have the right to access free public education, regardless of their postcode. I also believe that that standard should be core to our overseas development work on education.

2.54 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is also a great pleasure to follow all three of the previous speakers in this debate.

I wish to contribute a comment in my role as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Nigeria. Many Members who have heard me speak before about it will know that I look on that job not simply as one about trade but as one with a wider perspective of the UK's relations with Nigeria. Education has been a great factor in that.

I will first comment on the figures mentioned, such as our commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income to fund foreign aid. If we think about that for a minute, it means that for every £100 that we earn, only 70p goes to foreign aid. That is all that the commitment is, so I find it amazing that it generates such hostile press for some people in the UK. When I looked at the DFID figures—I praise the Department enormously for its work—education took up something like 11% of the budget. I do not know whether the figure remains the same, but it is about 11%, which is a substantial contribution.

Like the two previous speakers, I want to comment on the Send My Friend to School programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) made a comment about the *Hansard* report, and I found that the response of No. 10 to submissions from schools involved in that programme has been outstanding. It has been very supportive of the whole initiative, which has gone down incredibly well with the schoolchildren.

On that basis, let us look at what we fund and how we should fund it. The first point to make is that, although it is difficult on 11% of the budget to segment the market, there is a need to improve girls' education, in particular in Nigeria. I have been very pleased to see programmes undertaken by DFID to improve girls'

[John Howell]

education. I noticed one in particular, which was intended to improve the social and economic basis on which girls had opportunities to exist in the country.

Why is the role of girls in Nigeria important? We do not have to look far. In recent news programmes, we have seen the kidnap of so many girls in Nigeria, and their use and misuse by Boko Haram, and that is the origin of my fears. I have also made a much broader point to the leaders of that country over a number of years: they will not defeat Boko Haram by military means; they will have to defeat it by giving the people of the area something that they do not already have. One such thing that they can give is education, which can play a great role in that.

It is also important to look not only at education itself but at the other side of the coin, which is the provision of training for teachers. In Nigeria, one impressive project is to train another 66,000 effective mathematicians as teachers, its particular effect being to improve the lives of up to 2 million children. That is something we should all be proud of, because we are talking not just about people—the girls and the teachers—but about the quality of schools, of teachers and of the learning, which all need to be improved.

2.59 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I join my colleagues in congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this debate and on setting out the case in such a powerful and comprehensive opening speech. He began by talking about the challenge of winning the public argument on 0.7% and our commitment to the poorest people in the poorest countries of the world. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) also made that case very well. Investing in global education is one of the best ways in which we can ensure value for taxpayers' money, but as my colleague from the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) said, that is often matched by voluntary public donations to charities and other civil society organisations.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on global education. We receive secretariat support from RESULTS UK. Like other Members, I have made a visit with RESULTS, although I went to Liberia, where we looked primarily at some of the health challenges after Ebola. We also took the opportunity to look at some of the education challenges that that country faces. I join others in paying tribute to the fantastic Send My Friend to School campaign. It is a remarkable coalition that mobilises children and young people in this country in solidarity with children and young people in some of the poorest countries around the world. I am especially pleased that Send My Friend has decided this year to focus its efforts on the most marginalised children—hence the focus of today's debate. I urge the Minister to give serious consideration to the recommendations in the Send My Friend report.

Every child deserves an education, but as the hon. Member for Henley rightly reminded us, they deserve a quality education. The shift in public policy on global

education to greater priority on quality alongside quantity is vital. Millions continue to miss out on that basic human right to a quality education simply because of who they are or where they live. Existing inequalities in societies are reinforced when the various exclusion factors overlap. Education is crucial if we are to tackle the twin evils of global poverty and global inequality. Rightly, it runs through the core of the sustainable development goals, most explicitly in SDG 4, which commits the world to improving access, quality and equity in education. It is worth mentioning that the sustainable development goals are universal—they apply here as well as in other parts of the world. We still have challenges in our country to do with addressing inequalities and quality in our education system.

After the 2016 general election, the International Development Committee decided to complete its predecessor's work, which led to the publication in November of that year of our report "DFID's work on education: Leaving no one behind?" We reached the conclusion that the Department for International Development has prioritised investment in education in a way that many other donors have not. We welcome that priority, but we also said that if global goal 4 is to be achieved, all donors must considerably increase the amount of aid allocated to global education. For that reason, we called on the UK to go further than the 10% or 11% of recent years, to commit to allocating a larger proportion of our overseas aid to education.

As part of that inquiry, we visited refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, mostly to look at how they provide education to children who have fled conflict in Syria. While we were in Jordan, we visited a very impressive United Nations Relief and Works Agency school for Palestinian children. Last month UNRWA launched its 2019 emergency appeal and budget requirement, which totalled more than \$1 billion. That is the amount it needs simply to maintain last year's level of service. At a time when the Trump Administration have cut their support for the UN Relief and Works Agency, we need to work with our international partners to ensure the funding gap left by US reductions is closed, to protect services for Palestinian children.

The Committee's attention on education for the most marginalised has continued; next week we will publish our report on forced displacement in Africa. As the hon. Member for Glasgow East said in his opening speech, refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than children on the whole; in fact, the majority of registered refugee children around the world are simply not in school. Children caught in crises that are not of their making should not be denied their right to an education, but humanitarian finance suffers from being short term and unpredictable.

Education Cannot Wait tells us that education in emergencies gets just 1.9% of all humanitarian spending—that is less than one fiftieth. I welcome the leading role that DFID has played in the development of Education Cannot Wait. The Minister will know that Education Cannot Wait is due for replenishment this year. I echo the hon. Member for Glasgow East and ask the Minister to give a commitment that the Government will continue to support Education Cannot Wait. Indeed, I will go further and ask for an increased UK commitment to Education Cannot Wait, and an early announcement, so that we can trigger additional support from other donors.

Save the Children reports that more than 70% of Rohingya children who have escaped genocide in Myanmar are out of school in Bangladesh. UNICEF warned that “if we don’t make the investment in education now, we face the very real danger of seeing a ‘lost generation’ of Rohingya children”.

In our report, the International Development Committee recommended a long-term strategy for education in emergencies. The tragic reality is that as conflicts become more protracted, if education provision is ignored, the futures of those children are put at real risk.

A number of Members, most notably the hon. Member for Crawley, who is the Committee’s rapporteur on education, reminded us that disabled children face some of the greatest barriers to education. That is the case in our constituencies, and it is even more the case in some of the poorest countries in the world. Recent analysis estimates that half of disabled children in low and middle-income countries are out of school. In some countries, the figures are even worse, with an estimated 90% of disabled children out of school according to UNICEF.

When the Committee visited Kenya as part of the education inquiry, we were hugely impressed by the Girls Education Challenge project in Kisumu, which is run by Leonard Cheshire Disability. Through such programmes and its disability framework, the Department for International Development is making good progress, but it needs to ensure that the framework is implemented across all DFID’s education programmes. After what we saw in Kisumu, the Committee reflected, on a cross-party basis, that we want more of those sorts of programmes to be funded, because it felt like the very best of UK aid reaching those who are often the most left behind, and the best value for money for UK taxpayers.

The Department should use its influence to shine a light on the needs of disabled children, just as it has done very successfully with regard to education for girls and young women. As we believe this area is vital, we recently launched an inquiry into DFID’s broader work on disability. If we are to reach the most marginalised, it is vital that we do more to encourage developing countries to invest in education. Last year, the Department committed £225 million to the Global Partnership for Education. That is a very welcome UK commitment, though it was below the amount that civil society organisations had been calling for.

The GPE takes an approach that deserves great respect and commendation. It says that before it will work with a poorer country, it wants a commitment from that country’s Government to increasing the amount they spend on education, ideally to 20% of the budget. That is a challenging figure for many countries, but it means that the support that comes from the multilateral organisation triggers further domestic resource mobilisation through taxes in the country concerned. Four in five of the countries that GPE partners have maintained their education budget at or above a fifth of public expenditure, or increased their education budget in 2016—the most recent year for which we have figures. Some 41 million additional girls enrolled in school across the partner countries between 2002 and 2016.

To give just one example, Niger in Africa was one of the first countries to join the Global Partnership for Education in 2002. It has increased its spending on education from 5% of public spending to 22%, despite

an extraordinary backdrop of political instability, recurrent drought and conflict. In 2009 only 40% of children in that country completed primary school, but eight years later the figure had increased to 73%, showing remarkable progress in one of the poorest countries in the world. The International Development Committee has called on the Government to use their influence with partner countries to secure greater domestic spending on education, and I want to repeat that call today.

I will finish by saying something else about the way in which we can raise the money needed. As various colleagues have said, aid on its own will not resolve the matter. The scale of the challenge is such that even if all the wealthy countries of the world matched our 0.7% commitment on aid and prioritised education, as I wish they would, it would not provide the money that is needed. Alongside increased aid, we need to look at other mechanisms that mobilise resources for education. The international finance facility for education, which has been promoted by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, was first recommended three years ago. It has been given support in principle by the British Government as well as the United Nations, the World Bank and regional development banks. The aim is to multiply donor resources and motivate countries to increase their own investments. I genuinely believe that the facility, once up and running, has the potential to help deliver better-quality education to millions of the most marginalised children. It aims to raise at least \$10 billion of additional finance to help meet global goal 4 and thus—to remind ourselves—guarantee that by 2030 every child has access to quality primary and secondary education, and, crucially, quality pre-school learning. We know from all the evidence that early investment in education makes the largest difference to life chances. I know that the Secretary of State has offered her support in principle to the finance facility. I hope we will hear soon that the British Government are able to match that principled support with financial support.

One of the central aims of the global goals adopted almost four years ago is to leave no one behind. If we are to achieve that goal in education, it will require the sustainable increase in finance that I have described, but also a relentless focus on access, on the most marginalised and on quality, to which Members in this debate have rightly given priority. There is a worrying trend: despite a lot of progress since the millennium development goals were adopted almost two decades ago, education outcomes among the most marginalised have stagnated in many countries. In some cases, they have even declined, particularly in countries affected by conflict and with resulting displacement. It is incumbent on our country, the UK and the wider international community to step up our efforts to deliver on the pledge to leave no one behind in education.

I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow East and the Send My Friend to School coalition for providing the House with this opportunity to address such a crucial issue. If we get this right, we can make a massive difference to millions of children and young people, and their families, around the world.

3.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate. I apologise, Mr Hollobone,

[Jim Shannon]

for not being here on time; I was at the Backbench Business Committee asking for a debate that I will hopefully secure in the near future. The issue is of particular importance to me. I want to put on the record my thanks to the Minister for the commitment and passion that she has shown in her role. We understand that we will get a positive response from her, and I look forward to that. I also very much look forward to the contribution from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill).

My constituents—indeed, all our constituents—have been involved in the Send My Friend to School campaign. I remember taking the petitions, and the massive piece of cardboard that they were put on, to No. 10 Downing Street to hand it over to Prime Minister David Cameron. That was great for the kids back home in the schools, because it meant that what they were doing in the primary schools in my constituency was being heard by the Prime Minister and the Government at the highest level. It was really good news.

Hon. Members know that in my role as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief, I have campaigned for many years on behalf of those who are persecuted for their faith, and indeed those who are persecuted for having no faith at all. The groups are often some of the most marginalised communities in the world. One of the most important ways in which they are marginalised is through the denial of their right to education. I was reading about Send My Friend to School. Particularly young girls have been penalised, unfortunately, and children experience unfair treatment for reasons including having a disability—a point to which the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) referred—being a girl in a place where gender discrimination is rife; living in a rural area; experiencing poverty; and being caught up in an emergency. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) referred to Nigeria. I pray for the young girl, Leah Sharibu, who was kidnapped by Boko Haram almost two years ago and has still not been released because she is a Christian, whereas all the others were released. I am conscious of that as well.

I want to speak about three things: the state of education discrimination against religious or belief minorities; the benefits of tackling such discrimination; and what the UK Government can do to address that unjust discrimination. Last year, Christian Solidarity Worldwide produced its excellent “Faith and a Future” report, which examined the state of education discrimination against religious or belief minorities in countries around the world. It found that children and young people from marginalised religious or belief communities are often significantly discriminated against in many different ways when it comes to education.

In September last year, along with colleagues from this House and the House of Lords, I visited Pakistan, where children from minority faith communities are regularly subjected to psychological and physical abuse by fellow students and even teachers. We were able to talk to some of those who suffered discrimination because of their religious beliefs in Pakistan. I am pleased to see that Dr Shoaib Suddle has been appointed to his role; I

tabled an early-day motion on that subject. Hopefully he will be able to address some of the issues of minority religious, sex and ethnic groups in Pakistan.

In Burma, non-Buddhist children from Chin State are placed in Government-run Buddhist monastic schools, where they are prohibited from practising their faith and are forcibly converted. In Iran, Baha’i children and young people find their access to education at all levels actively denied by state law policies. I have spoken numerous times about the Baha’is. I grieve for them, because when it comes to education in Iran, they are directly discriminated against.

CSW’s report highlights how intolerance in education systems is often facilitated by school curricula and textbooks, which, at their worst, stigmatise and incite violence towards religious or belief minorities, and at their best simply omit those groups from curricula entirely to paint a picture of countries that have only one religion or belief. There is no country in the world that I am aware of that has only one religion or belief among its constituents, its people, its nation. Such intolerance often leads to violence, both in schools and wider society. Just last week, I heard the heartbreaking story of a young Pakistani boy who was stabbed with a machete by his schoolmates simply for the crime of being Christian. In Pakistan, I met a young lady who has a doctorate, but who was in one of the Christian slums, giving children the rudiments of an education, to give them a chance to better themselves.

DFID has clearly invested large amounts of money in Pakistan, which is a country close to my heart—as many countries are; but I have always had a soft spot for Pakistan, although last year was my first time visiting it. DFID has invested almost £680 million in education in Pakistan, including £122.7 million in 2017-18. I am not sure whether the Minister will be able to respond, but I would certainly like to be reassured that the money is going to people of different religions and to ethnic minorities. It is important that that be on the record.

Is it any wonder that some turn to violence or extremism when they are repeatedly told, from an early age, that certain people are bad and do not even deserve to come to the same school? What message do we expect children to learn if we turn a blind eye to bullying, deny certain belief groups access to education, ignore their contribution to society—they clearly have a contribution to make—and at every level suggest that they are inferior, wicked or unworthy? How can we hope for societies free of the scourge of extremism and violence when school textbooks preach hate against certain communities? That is why tackling educational discrimination against religious or belief communities is so important.

That leads me to my second point. In the long term, if we want to reduce conflict and build cohesive communities that are resilient against violence and extremism, both in the UK and around the world, we must invest in education systems that celebrate diversity and encourage mutual respect. I thank the Library for its comprehensive and detailed background briefing for the debate, which contains many helpful comments. It quotes a speech that seems to me the key to the debate, or its core:

“People—children—are not broken just by the wave that submerges the life vest or the convoy that does not make it to the besieged town. They are broken by the absence of hope—the soul-crushing certainty that there is nothing ahead for which to plan or prepare, not even a place in school.”

Today's debate is about giving them hope and opportunity.

"What holds them back is not just their location, their homelessness, and their poverty—but the death of their dreams. The only way to reach the Sustainable Development Goal of every child at school is for a child's real passport to the future stamped in the classroom—and not at a border check post."

That is the key to what we are trying to achieve.

Apart from the obvious benefits of tackling educational discrimination against marginalised religious or belief communities, the other principal benefit for Governments is the economic growth that can come from giving whole communities the skills and knowledge to participate in the workforce. In 2012, a UNESCO report found that for every \$1 spent on increasing education, as much as \$10 or \$15 could be generated in economic growth. That is the sort of considerable return on an investment that we all wish for—a 1,000% or 1,500% return. It is also a considerable investment in young people and the education that we want them to have.

Another speech quoted in the Library briefing states that

"your education stays with you. It defines your future path, whatever start you may have got in life. Wherever you go in the world—this is a universal truth."

It mentions Malala, the young girl who was shot in the head in Pakistan:

"Remember what Malala told the UN after being shot in the head for going to school: 'The terrorists are afraid of books and pens. The power of education frightens them.'"

That is another reason for pushing education and giving everyone who really wants it the opportunity to have it.

I want to finish within the timescale you asked for, Mr Hollobone, and to set out five things that can be done to tackle educational discrimination. First, DFID can invest more resources in training programmes for teachers around the world that will teach them how to promote tolerance and respect in the classroom. We can all probably identify a teacher or teachers who had a significant impact on our lives. I am no different; I can do so quickly. There were a number of my teachers who promoted tolerance and respect in the classroom, and we need to do that. That focus is my No. 1 point.

Secondly, the UK could work with Governments to develop school curriculums that promote respect for others and include the contribution of minorities. How greatly that is needed! I automatically think of the example of Pakistan, because of my visit last year; the Government there sets aside 5% of jobs for religious minorities and ethnic groups, but if a person does not have the educational achievement, they cannot get one of those 5% of jobs, and will end up doing the most menial of jobs. Let us give those people the opportunity for educational attainment, so that they can achieve and get jobs. There are jobs, including jobs for nurses, but training is needed if people are to get those jobs and move forward.

The UK can show its commitment to the endeavour by doing the same in UK schools. The Government could take the lead by ensuring that the contribution of minorities—such as the Commonwealth soldiers from India and elsewhere, who fought and died for the United Kingdom in the great wars—is recognised in the British school curriculum. DFID could make funding available to non-governmental organisations that provide education

to those in marginalised religious and belief communities, seeking them out and helping them to achieve that remarkable goal.

The last of my suggestions is that the UK could encourage countries such as Pakistan to commit to temporary measures to address educational discrimination, such as having quotas for people from religious or belief minorities in educational institutions. We want members of Christian and other religious minorities, and ethnic minorities, to get the chance to be teachers in schools. Would not that be a wonderful opportunity? What an achievement it would be if some of the people DFID encouraged could do that for children around the world.

3.27 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this important and timely debate and for his insightful reflections on his time in Tanzania, which obviously proved incredibly fruitful. They were an education for all of us in the Chamber, and for those who are watching the debate. It has been a pleasure to hear all the speeches this afternoon, which have put the highest value on education. I am reading a speech that I have written, and many people in the world will never have the opportunity to do such a thing. It goes without saying that I and my colleagues, and the Clerks and anyone else working here, would not be here without the essential education that has been provided. Another thing that goes without saying is that education is a human right—and not only that: quality education should be a human right for all.

Without doubt, education can be the most valuable tool in the fight against global poverty. Public health, skilled workforces, economic prosperity, civil society and peace all benefit from sustained development of global education. Yet some of the world's most vulnerable people have no access to education, which leaves millions of children locked out of learning altogether, because of humanitarian crises across the world.

It was nice to hear Members reflect on their time in local schools. I was at Camperdown Primary School two or three weeks ago, and a programme was being run there on what it is to be a global leader. Homelessness, peace in the world and prosperity were highlighted as priorities, but everyone prioritised education. Those were P5 to P7 children, so I am looking forward to sending my speech to them after the debate—because it is for people in my own communities that I am speaking, as well as those around the world who have no education.

The UNHCR has reported that

"over the past two decades, the global population of forcibly displaced people has grown substantially from just under 34 million in 1997 to 68.5 million in 2019."

In other words, in 30 years it has more than doubled and, indeed, is more than the entire population of the UK. That trend is set only to increase with the continuing impact of climate change. Astonishingly, those people include more than 25 million refugees, more than half of whom are under the age of 18, and refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than their non-refugee peers. In the Central African Republic, for example, half a million children are out of school, and in Afghanistan, 3.7 million children—more than 2 million

[Chris Law]

of whom are girls—are being denied an education. UNESCO has estimated that twice as many girls as boys will never start school. Can anyone in this room imagine that happening to their own children or in our society?

My esteemed colleague, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who chairs the International Development Committee, mentioned the 1 million Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, which I visited along with the Committee last year. Some 70% of those refugees have no access to education, which is a great loss for that generation. The Rohingya are in Bangladesh because of the most awful crimes in Burma that were akin to genocide, and because a lack of education in Burma resulted in the targeting of ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya—another reason why education is fundamental for all. The story is the same in conflict and post-conflict zones around the world. The Education Cannot Wait fund has estimated that 75 million children worldwide have had their education disrupted because of conflict in the last decade alone.

As we heard, in 2017, the International Development Committee, on which I sit, published a report on the Department's work on education, highlighting the global learning crisis. It recommended that DFID increase its share of UK aid for global education and give the full amount requested—\$500 million—to the Global Partnership for Education. The report went on to state that the groups most likely to be left out of education are the most vulnerable—the very poorest, girls, disabled children, and those affected by conflict and emergencies. To be sure of fulfilling the UK Government's commitment to the sustainable development goals, DFID must now focus on those groups and ensure that no one is left behind.

Aid spending has been in the press over the past couple of weeks, and we should be mindful of that issue—indeed, I was glad to hear the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) mention the importance of that 70p in every £100. I have been deeply concerned over the past couple of weeks to hear the former Foreign Secretary call for a change in the Department's purpose from poverty reduction, to furthering

“the nation's overall strategic goals”.

Last weekend, we learned that private letters have been sent to the Chancellor by a number of international development organisations and charities, warning that UK aid is being diverted from the poorest countries to promote commercial and political interests. I have said this many times in the Chamber, and I cannot emphasise it enough: development spending must be focused on helping the poorest and most vulnerable, and on alleviating global poverty, not on advancing the UK's foreign policy goals.

It is particularly concerning that a recent UNESCO report noted a clear decline in the proportion of international aid being spent on education since 2011, and stated that levels of international aid for education remain much lower than aid allocated, for example, to government and civil society, health, or infrastructure. Last year, the UK increased its support for global education funding in developing countries by 50% to £75 million per year. That is undoubtedly welcome, but to put it into perspective, last year schools in the UK

spent more than £75 million just on advertising for new staff. If the UK Government are serious about helping children to access education, they must commit to increase funding, and ensure that it reaches the most vulnerable people. Will the Minister confirm whether her Department will review and increase the UK's commitment to the Education Cannot Wait fund this year?

The SNP is clear: aid spending must contribute to sustainable development and the fight against poverty, injustice and inequality, and there are few better ways to do that than by funding education for the world's most vulnerable people. If we are to establish lasting peace in regions of the world that are scarred by conflict, education must be the foundation on which that is built. DFID is recognised as a global leader in promoting education in developing countries, and I urge the Minister to consider the needs of the most marginalised children and young people across the world and to put money—as recommended in the Committee's report—into championing those needs. I want to go home to my constituency and say to the young children I met just a few weeks ago that this country is truly delivering on education and global leadership.

3.34 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) for securing this debate and for his passionate speech. I congratulate the Send My Friend to School coalition on its report, and on its broader work in calling for quality education for children across the globe. I thank the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) for his contribution—it is wonderful that schools in his constituency are involved in the Send My Friend to School campaign. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor) shared her experience of education provision in Nairobi, and spoke of her concerns about Bridge International, making the point that education should be free from commercial interests. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke in support of the 0.7% commitment for UK foreign aid, which was welcome, and reminded us that for every £100 made in the UK, 70p goes towards foreign aid. I thank him for that contribution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who chairs the International Development Committee, made a passionate speech to remind us of our commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4, not just globally but in the UK. Education in emergencies was a key aspect of his speech, and I thank him not just for highlighting the challenges but for offering solutions. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who chairs the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief, spoke about children who are discriminated against based on their faith and belief when accessing education, and he rightly raised concerns about what some children are taught about intolerance of others. He is a great champion in the work he does, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

As we have heard, the most marginalised people are not a homogenous group, and we must consider how people with disabilities are treated and catered for, how refugees and internally displaced people may be excluded

from formal education, and what impact emergencies and conflict situations have on access to education, especially in countries such as the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which may not garner as much international attention or resource mobilisation. Each group deserves to be recognised, and the specific nature of their educational needs addressed.

The World Bank's "World Development Report 2018" declared an international learning crisis. Across the world, some 260 million children are not enrolled in primary or secondary school, and many of those who are do not receive the quality of education that they need to equip them with the skills required to thrive in adulthood. The report from the Send My Friend to School coalition presents a series of practical suggestions about ways to provide quality education for all.

Hon. Members have rightly raised issues and concerns about the vast number of young people who are not getting the education they deserve. Researchers at the University of Cambridge found that girls living in poverty in Pakistan and Nigeria spend an average of just one year in school, and in India, Mozambique, Cameroon and Sierra Leone they spend just two years. That figure is even more shocking when compared with wealthy urban boys in those countries who receive between 10 and 12 years of education. Limited educational opportunities for girls are not only a human rights issue, as girls are unable to realise their right to education, but cost countries trillions of dollars in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.

Last year, Save the Children revealed that we are not on track to meet Sustainable Development Goal 4.1, which seeks to ensure that all girls and boys

"complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes".

Does the Minister acknowledge that warning? With 85% of children in low-income countries having no access to pre-primary education, what does she make of the chances of reaching target 4.2, and does she think we will meet the global goal of education for all?

I appreciate that the Government have acknowledged there is a problem with marginalisation and inequality, particularly for women and girls, but unfortunately they have not always undertaken projects that will reach the most marginalised. Analysis carried out in 2016 by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact into DFID's support for marginalised girls stated:

"DFID does not have a coherent strategy for addressing girls' marginalisation in education, and that its various activities are not well joined up."

ICAI went on to say that it had

"identified a clear pattern of DFID programmes losing their focus on marginalised girls through the implementation process, leading to disappointing results."

The Government have had almost three years to act on those disappointing findings. Will the Minister explain how the Government have addressed those concerns, and what work they will undertake to ensure that all girls receive the education that they need?

I would particularly welcome the Minister's response to those points, given that a more recent evaluation of DFID's partnerships with the private sector under the

girls' education challenge—the so-called strategic partnership windows—found that those projects undertaken in partnership with the private sector

"had little or no impact on literacy and numeracy outcomes of the marginalised girls that they reached."

The evaluation also found:

"Projects focussed on marginalised regions, not always on the most marginalised girls."

Most peculiarly for projects designed to reach marginalised girls, they actually reached more boys than girls.

The Opposition recognise that the main way to address inequality and access to quality education is to build strong public services. I welcome the fact that the vast majority of DFID education funding goes to public education, but I am concerned about the minority of UK aid that supports for-profit private education because, as I have just mentioned, we know that such models cannot reach the most marginalised children.

On the matter of UK aid being used to support commercial education companies, I am deeply concerned that during January's education world forum the Minister reportedly met with the Ugandan Minister of Education to discuss expanding private British education centres in Uganda. Will she guarantee that DFID's work on education will always prioritise the children who need to access education, and that she will not seek to use the aid budget to further the commercial interests of UK companies?

With regard to global education, the UK rightly seeks to be a global player. To do that effectively we must remain open to learning from others. The European Parliament recently passed a strong resolution in relation to its aid spending on education. Among other things, it concurs with the recommendation in the report that we are discussing today that we should ensure that education aid is free from commercial interests, that we do not support for-profit providers, and that education is free and universally available at the point of use by reaffirming a commitment not to use official development assistance to support private, commercial educational establishments. Does the Minister agree with that recommendation?

I congratulate the human rights experts who drafted and adopted the Abidjan principles on the right to education two weeks ago in Ivory Coast. The principles recognise that free, quality education is a universal right, and that the role of private actors in education must be regulated to ensure that they do not undermine that right. When the final document is published in March, will the Minister agree to look at it and act on advice on the rules and regulations necessary to ensure that private schools do not negatively affect the right of everyone to access a free, quality public education? Will she also encourage all states where DFID operates to ensure that all UK programmes, policies and projects support public education systems, which are the most effective way to advance equity?

3.42 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate. I also congratulate the Send My Friend to School campaign, which has successfully engaged so many children, particularly in primary schools, on the importance of education around the world, and the work that we do.

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) spoke about 70p for every £100. I think £100 is probably too much money for most primary school children to relate to, so when I go into primary schools I use the example of whether, if they had £10 in pocket money, 7p would seem too much or too little to spend on overseas development assistance. I am always encouraged by the support shown for it by young people.

I am proud to have been a member of the Government that enshrined the 0.7% commitment into statute, and I am proud that all the major political parties in this country stood at the last election on platforms of continuing to respect that commitment. The support shown for it by young people gives me great confidence that the primary school children of today will continue to endorse it when they become voters.

I highlight one of the excellent programmes that we run from the Department for International Development—the Connecting Classrooms initiative. Not all hon. Members may have yet had the opportunity to promote that in their primary schools. I do not know whether Mount Vernon Primary School or Northgate Primary School have thought about applying to be Connecting Classrooms schools, but in my constituency, for example, Great Malvern Primary School and 10 other primary schools in the Malvern area have a very vibrant link that has lasted for a decade with schools in Tanzania. I know how much the young people and teachers in both countries have benefited from those links, so I draw hon. Members' attention to that.

In his excellent opening speech, the hon. Member for Glasgow East highlighted the importance of education for girls, children with disabilities and refugee children. I will highlight the work that the UK Government do on that. The only area of political dissent, in a remarkable debate which saw an outbreak of consensus, was on whether private investment in education around the world should be allowed. As Members pointed out, the UK itself is not currently using any of our overseas development assistance with Bridge schools, although 5% of the education support that we give does go to schools where private capital is involved. CDC, which is our private sector investment arm, does have an investment in Bridge schools—an investment that creates a return that can then be further used to expand education.

I am not in the same ideological camp as Opposition Members: I am much more open-minded. We need to focus on 12 years of quality education for all. That should be the objective. I was inclined to support what the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) said regarding the fact that all the development budgets of all the countries in the world will not be enough for us to address the learning gap that Members have rightly highlighted. Therefore, why should we be ideological and draw the line at other providers coming in and providing support?

Jim Shannon: In my constituency of Strangford, Elim Missions is a very active church group that helps in Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Many other churches do similar educational projects outside of what DFID does. We all know of such examples from our constituencies—the Minister probably knows of some from her own. We should put on record our thanks to those church groups and faith groups for all that they do.

Harriett Baldwin: The people of the United Kingdom are remarkably generous, and I am always struck by the range of different ways in which people help to support this agenda, independently of what we are doing in DFID. I pay tribute to all that work, and highlight the small charities fund within DFID, from which people can apply for funding for their projects. Opportunities are also given by aid match. Mention was made earlier of child soldiers in the Central African Republic. We were able to aid match War Child's project; for every £1 raised by the British public, we matched that with £1. That is just one example of how we can draw on the generosity of the British people.

I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Henley as trade envoy to Nigeria. He mentioned Boko Haram. It is worth reminding ourselves that the very words “boko haram” effectively mean “western education is a sin”, loosely translated. It is so important to recognise the power of education in combating those dangerous terrorist movements. Colleagues also highlighted the importance of teacher education in delivering 12 years of quality education.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby asked about the International Finance Facility. As he well knows, we support that principle. We support anything that is successful in bringing more funding into this important agenda. We are doing more technical design work, and then we will set out the UK's position as far as that is concerned.

I say to the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), that we should all acknowledge that we are not on track in terms of meeting Sustainable Development Goals 4.1 and 4.2 by 2030. The world has not done enough to address that, so I welcome Members' support for the work we do and encouragement for us to do even more.

I was saddened that the hon. Lady mentioned the ICAI report dating back to 2016. She will be aware that we have subsequently published a very clear and welcome education strategy paper, and that we have made further announcements about funding to address girls' education. On my bilateral meeting with the Ugandan Education Minister during the Education World Forum, I do not recall the specific point the hon. Lady mentioned, but I remember telling the Minister how much I had enjoyed visiting a school run by Promoting Equality in African Schools in Kampala this year. I believe that may be a privately funded provider. It is outstanding, so I reiterate on the record my support for the excellent education I saw being delivered.

We heard resounding support for the UK's campaign for 12 years of quality education. We are absolutely committed to driving a step change in the global response to the learning crisis that colleagues rightly highlighted, and we match our commitment with resources. In fact, I hope colleagues report back to the schools in their constituencies that the UK provides more than 10% of all global education funding through overseas development assistance. We work bilaterally in 23 countries and multilaterally in 66 further countries. I am immensely proud—I hope colleagues report this back, too—that between 2015 and 2017 the UK supported 7.1 million children to gain a decent education, of whom at least 3.3 million were girls.

In fighting marginalisation, our first priority is to close the gender gap, which a number of colleagues mentioned. We use our position on the world stage to

shine a spotlight on the needs of the most marginalised and their right to a basic education. In the past year, we have joined forces with international partners at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting; at the G7 in Canada, where the Prime Minister announced further funding to help girls' education; and of course at the United Nations last September. I can commit to all those hon. Members who asked that we will continue to look to such forums to lead the campaign on 12 years of quality education.

DFID's published education policy prioritises three things: better teaching, identifying and backing system reforms that will deliver better results, and, above all, targeting the most marginalised children, who are at risk of being left behind. We heard staggering figures on the learning gap, and people highlighted the particular challenges for children with disabilities and those who never attend school. Children in conflict-affected countries are a third less likely to complete primary school, and girls in sub-Saharan Africa are nearly 25% more likely than boys to be out of school.

Educating girls is one of the best buys in development spending, because one extra year of primary schooling for girls can increase their future wages by 10% to 20%. We know, too, that educating girls is the bedrock of healthier and more peaceful societies. The UK is therefore committed to supporting girls to access a quality education.

Last year was a landmark year for girls' education. DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for Education all got behind the Government's girls' education campaign, Leave No Girl Behind. Our flagship girls' education challenge supports up to 1.5 million girls to access education and acquire know-how for their life and work. Many of the initiatives that form part of that provision will help girls who do not attend school because of menstruation, and will combine with other work we do to ensure access to water and sanitation. In the coming months, that challenge fund will reach 250,000 highly marginalised girls who have never attended school or have dropped out due to poverty, motherhood, disability or conflict, and, importantly, give them a second chance to learn.

Colleagues mentioned children with disabilities. We held a summit last year to tackle that important issue. I do not have time to draw out the progress that has been made as a result of that summit, but I assure colleagues that Governments in Rwanda, Zimbabwe and elsewhere have stepped up their provision and their commitment to giving children access.

Colleagues also mentioned children who are suffering through conflict and crisis in places where education can be the difference between a future of exploitation and squandered potential, and one of hope. Education can give children the tools to rebuild their lives and, eventually, their countries. School provides children with stability in a conflict environment. That is why we are proud to be a founder of, and one of the largest contributors to, Education Cannot Wait, which reached more than 650,000 children last year and built more

than 1,000 classrooms. We are reviewing and renewing our funding for education in emergencies. Our objective is to get displaced and refugee children into classrooms faster, and to put short-term international funding on a much longer term footing.

We also fund the Global Partnership for Education. We will fully support 880,000 children in schools for each of the three years covered by our pledge. Some 450,000 of those children will be in fragile and conflict-affected states. Whether it is in Syria, in Lebanon or in other conflict-affected areas, we are doing what we can. We also announced our endorsement of the safe schools declaration, which underlines our political support for the protection of schools and the children in them. We will step up our work in the Sahel; Niger was mentioned, and I also highlight the work we are planning to do in Chad.

Let me conclude by again congratulating the hon. Member for Glasgow East on securing the debate. I hope a large degree of consensus was reached. We are committed to continuing this important work.

3.56 pm

David Linden: At one point I was worried the debate would collapse early, given the rate at which we were getting through speeches, but we can always rely on certain Members—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) included—to pad things out.

In all seriousness, we had an excellent debate. I often say to my constituents back home in Glasgow that Westminster Hall is the place where I most enjoy being in Westminster. I am a Scottish nationalist politician, so I generally do not enjoy being in Westminster, but Westminster Hall is the safe space I come to. It is a place where we do consensus politics, and the House is at its best when we speak with one voice.

The Minister is right that there was only one bone of contention. Well, perhaps there were two, if we count whether we should explain 0.7% to primary school pupils as 70p in £100 or 7p in a tenner, but the only real bone of contention was private involvement, on which there is perhaps more for us to talk about.

Debates like this are about ensuring that the House empowers the Minister to go to the Treasury and argue for further investment and resources. I think we did that very well. Much more can be done to move this agenda forward through the all-party parliamentary group on global education for all, which is chaired by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), but given the consensus we heard today, I am confident that we can move forward. I am sure we all look forward to having many more debates like this one and much more of the open dialogue I have greatly appreciated this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered global education for the most marginalised.

Environment Agency Permits

3.58 pm

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered Environment Agency permits.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I count myself very lucky to be the Member of Parliament for East Surrey, an area characterised by beautiful rolling countryside and vibrant towns and villages, all within easy reach of London. The north of my constituency even falls within the M25, although, with all the green space, people would be forgiven for not realising it. East Surrey is the epitome of what makes England unique. We know how fortunate we are, and we take very seriously our duty as custodians and protectors of our stunning local environment for future generations. I called for the debate because I am concerned about our ability to protect the environment for our children and grandchildren, but I am hopeful that is something that can easily be rectified by the very able Minister.

If hon. Members indulge me, I will tell them about the constituency case that has prompted the debate. Oxted quarry, regulated by the Environment Agency, has been problematic for a number of years. My predecessor, Peter Ainsworth, was doing battle with the side-effects of the quarry as far back as 2005, if not before. The leader of Tandridge District Council, Martin Fisher, who is in the Gallery, has also been doing battle with the issue for several years, on behalf of residents.

The quarry has two functions: chalk extraction and waste infill. However, the problems for the local environment stem from the volume of heavy goods vehicles that end up on East Surrey's country roads, because a working quarry needs to transport its materials. We have long had issues with HGVs thundering through small villages and along narrow lanes, causing distress to residents and costly damage to the highways. I am sure colleagues in rural constituencies and my Surrey neighbours will recognise that.

The latest chapter in the story of Oxted quarry began in 2005, when the Environment Agency granted permission for the operator to infill the quarry with 100,000 tonnes of inert material a year. That was in addition to the 18,000 tonnes of chalk that has been extracted annually since the 1930s. Why was that a problem? Before the licence was granted, only four or five HGVs made return trips each day, which was some 10 movements. After the licence was granted, there was a dramatic increase in HGV movements: local authority records show that at their peak, in 2008, an average weekday saw 150 HGV movements. On six days, there were in excess of 216 HGV movements, which meant roughly one vehicle every three minutes.

To put this in context, the access road to the quarry that HGVs must use is a narrow category C lane, known as Chalkpit Lane. I am sure that hon. Members can picture what kind of road it is. North of the quarry is a steep hill with an HGV restriction, which is often breached. The correct route in and out of the quarry passes rows of cottages without footpaths and pavements, and goes under a railway bridge and through a residential area with mainly grass verges. At some points, it is nearly impossible for an HGV and another vehicle to pass

each other when travelling in different directions. It is not a road that can withstand such huge volumes of HGV traffic. It is damaging to the road itself, but more importantly it is hugely dangerous to residents and pedestrians, some of whom use the lane to get to local schools.

Fast forward through a time of some respite in the area, when the quarry paused operations, to 2016, when the operator sought permission to double its infill to 200,000 tonnes per year and the Environment Agency was asked to make a further decision. Permission was granted, which caused distress locally. The decision set in motion a two-year battle between Surrey County Council as the mineral planning authority, the quarry operator and local district councillors, led by Martin Fisher, to ensure that strong limits were placed on vehicle movements and to stop the narrow, country Chalkpit Lane becoming akin to an HGV highway.

When discussions began, the operator wanted the limit to be set as high as 200 movements a day. They had a licence for 200,000 tonnes of infill, which needs a lot of lorries. After discussions with the operator—and while facing the threat of legal action for potential loss of revenue should restrictions be brought in—Surrey County Council officers recommended a limit of 156 movements. Fortunately, due in large part to my hard work and that of local councillors, the limit settled on by the Surrey County Council planning committee was much lower, at 112 movements. I thank Tandridge District councillors, led by Martin Fisher, for their hard work. The limit was an improvement and the best we could have hoped for in the circumstances, but ultimately Surrey County Council should not have been in the position of making this decision.

I have talked a lot about roads and mentioned the Environment Agency briefly, but I am sure the Minister is wondering why I called a debate on Environment Agency permits. I hope the Minister will agree that the reason why HGV movements had to increase, and why Surrey County Council was put in a position where it had to allow over 100 movements on a narrow country lane not designed for lorries, is because the permit was granted. The Environment Agency's procedures meant it had no reason not to grant the permit. It was not just Surrey County Council that had its hands tied, but also the Environment Agency, whose representatives informed me at a meeting that legislation restricts them to considering whether only the site itself and the environment on the site can cope with the permit arrangements.

Oxted quarry can cope with 200,000 tonnes of infill—I have no doubt that it is big enough—but the wider environment of Chalkpit Lane and Oxted itself most certainly cannot cope. As I understand it, the Environment Agency has no statutory obligation to consult local authorities or even to consider the wider environmental implications outside the site. It is also unable to add conditions to the permit relating to areas that are the responsibility of other public bodies. In this instance, it cannot add vehicle movement conditions as they are the responsibility of the local authority.

I recognise that the Environment Agency and county planning authorities have different responsibilities, but I believe that there must be stronger co-ordination to ensure that projects that are given the go-ahead are consented to with a full, rounded view of the impact, and not in the current disjointed and piecemeal way.

The current approach has meant that Surrey County Council has faced a long battle with the operators, who believe—rightly or wrongly—that they have a right to infill 200,000 tonnes. The local authority was faced with an extremely difficult choice: should it bow to pressure from the operator, cover itself against potential legal action but put residents at risk, or should it do what was in the best interests of residents and run the risk of costly legal procedures, which would have an impact on how much money it would have to spend on the local area?

I called for the debate because it is obvious that there is a gap and mismatch in the legislation, which is causing wider problems. It is one of those cases where things fall between the cracks. I know that the Minister is capable and imaginative, and that the Government can do something about this, which will make a big difference across the country, not just in my constituency. Will the Minister commit to looking at the issue, so that the Environment Agency's permit procedures are changed, to ensure that local authorities can have a greater say before permits are issued or varied? I appreciate that that might require primary legislation, which could prove difficult in the current climate, but anything that can be done in the interim would be welcomed by residents.

The Environment Agency does a great job in protecting our environment, and does everything it can to ensure that businesses can function in rural communities in a way that protects them from harm. Unfortunately, legislation means that it cannot protect the wider environment around the sites it controls. I hope the Minister will agree that simply joining up procedure and closing cracks would bring enormous benefit to rural areas and ensure that entire communities can be protected for future generations.

4.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) on securing this debate. I must admit that when I saw him sitting on the other side of the Chamber I was worried that he had perhaps left the party, but I am delighted that he is certainly has not. I am sure he will understand that people may be twitchy at the moment.

Mr Gyimah: I would like to assure the Minister that I am not feeling at all Tiggerish.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend certainly has the courage of a lion in championing his constituents; I am sure they will be pleased that he is bringing forward this important matter in debate. We have corresponded previously on this topic, and I appreciate his frustration, but this debate clearly reflects the importance of ensuring we have clear and strong pollution and planning controls that work for environment, for people and for business.

As the Minister responsible for environmental permitting, I would like to clarify the purpose of the permitting framework, and the Environment Agency's role in relation to permitted sites. It is important to say at the outset

that permitting is entirely distinct from planning matters which, as he will be aware, fall to the planning authority, but it is important that all parties involved in consideration of these matters work together openly and transparently at a local level to achieve the best outcome for all.

The development of the environmental permitting framework was designed to make regulation simpler, more straightforward and more proportionate to the risk that it regulates. The objectives of the framework have been to make environmental permitting clearer for businesses while maintaining the same level of environmental protection. Before the framework was introduced, permitting and compliance systems developed largely in isolation and had, often for good reasons at the time, adopted various approaches to controlling different types of polluting activity, even where activities were undertaken on the same site, leading to duplication of regulatory control.

Under the environmental permitting regime, regulation of activities is more straightforward for business and regulators to use and apply. It allows the consolidation of different permits and delivers a streamlined approach to applications, guidance, and inspections. Environmental permits allow for flexibility and prescribing the environmental outcome, but not the way it is to be achieved; for example, a permit might require the operator to ensure that the site is sufficiently secured rather than setting a specific fence height. By cutting unnecessary red tape but continuing to provide protection of the environment and human health, that approach has been largely successful.

Environmental permits are issued for regulated activities carried out at sites. In the case of a permitted landfill facility such as that located at Oxted quarry in Surrey, a permit covers hazards and risks arising from the activities on the site of the landfill itself. Landfill involves the disposal of waste to land, so those risks include waste reception and quarantine, leachate and landfill gas containment and collection, wheel-washing, litter collection and various other operations on site.

It is the case that environmental permits specifically apply to what happens within the boundary of a site, while other matters such as traffic outside the site fall under wider planning controls. That distinction is important to avoid regulatory duplication; it is not the right thing to have two regulators making decisions over the same issue and therefore coming up with potentially different outcomes.

My hon. Friend will be aware that the county council is responsible for the relevant planning controls because it is both the minerals planning and waste planning authority. The council's stated aim in those roles is to minimise adverse impacts of minerals and waste-related development on local communities and the environment. As he has pointed out, Surrey County Council has restricted vehicle movements in and out of the Oxted quarry site to no more than an average of 76 daily HGV movements, or 38 in and 38 out, but I am conscious that there is also a maximum capping.

Mr Gyimah: I understand the Minister's point about seeking to avoid regulatory duplication. The challenge we have is that we want not to duplicate regulation, but to have a more rounded view of the regulatory process. As it happens, it looks as if one arm does not know what the other arm is doing, and it does not take into

[Mr Gyimah]

account all the factors, particularly the impact those factors have on residents. To the extent that any success was achieved in our campaign, it was more through sheer force of will than through the regulatory system working effectively.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend will be aware that there has been a permit in place for the activities at the quarry since 1980. Following an assessment in December 2016, the agency granted a variation, as he has pointed out, to increase the annual quantity for waste from 100,000 to 200,000 tonnes per year. That application was done legally; I think it is fair to say that the variation was lawfully granted and I also think it is accurate to say that the agency has not received any complaints from members of the public about the performance of the site since operations were scaled up in 2016.

When evaluating an application for a permit variation, the EA is required to consider any negative impacts that may result from managing waste within the boundary of the site. Other impacts outside the boundary of the site must be controlled through the planning process. Being transparent and open matters, but just as my hon. Friend cited the challenges a council might face as to why it would not make a decision on traffic movements, I am sure he will accept that the Environment Agency can be challenged on not making a variation to the permit if the environmental impact is not deemed to be negative. Since the scaling up of operations, there have been no complaints about the operation of the site, although I am conscious that the movements are causing concern to people.

The agency has visited the quarry site on a number of occasions in the past year to assess compliance with the permit. Compliance has generally been good, and where the agency has identified minor non-compliances they have been addressed by the operator. I am conscious that on one occasion there was evidence of mud and soil being tracked out of the site by exiting lorries which the company did not clean up as quickly as it should have; it stated that its road sweeper had broken down.

I am also conscious that at the time of processing the variation of the permit, the Environment Agency did not carry out a wider consultation with the local community. I recognise that if it had been aware of concerns or complaints, that is something that it could have done at the time. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Environment Agency has since committed to consulting more widely than is statutorily required for any future mineral extraction applications in Surrey, but it is important to make clear

that the agency can only consider matters raised through consultation that are within its regulatory remit. In the case of the Oxted quarry landfill site it regulates the disposal of waste and requires that Southern Gravel comply with its environmental permit, but it does not have the power to regulate the impacts of HGV movements.

The Environment Agency and local planning authorities each have clear, strong and distinct roles with regard to pollution and planning control. The necessary distinctions in regulatory role and remit can lead to practical issues on the ground. I fully understand that the mindset of local residents and my hon. Friend, who is their MP, is that the increase in permitted tonnage allowed at the Oxted site is inseparable from the increase in HGVs.

Our published guidance makes it clear that where a regulated facility requires a permit and planning permission, the operator should make both applications in parallel wherever possible. That helps the operator, the planning authority and the Environment Agency to join up where that is of benefit to all concerned. The same principle of joined-up regulation should apply to significant permit variations, and I have asked the agency to ensure that it discusses that with local authorities in relation to sites of possible high public interest.

That should be a matter of good practice, which picks up links between planning and permitting responsibilities where they arise. Locally, the Environment Agency has said that it will continue to work with Surrey County Council and applicants to consider the twin tracking of planning and permitting applications where appropriate. That is sensible local co-ordination that can be established on a case-by-case basis, without the need for additional legislative controls.

I am conscious that what I have said today will not necessarily satisfy my hon. Friend. He will recognise that legislation that adds further regulatory barriers to the progress of business is not something that this Government instinctively support. However, I hope that his example shows that the Environment Agency has listened carefully and is trying to work with local authorities, particularly in Surrey, to learn lessons from this. I commend the council for being strict on the number of movements allowed per day. I am confident that both the county council and, as I have demonstrated, the Environment Agency are undertaking their enforcement actions accordingly. This is an important way for central Government and local government to work together.

Question put and agreed to.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended.

Former British Child Migrants: Payment Scheme

4.30 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the former British child migrants payment scheme.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, on this very important issue. This is not the first time that we have debated the issue in this place, and I am very pleased to say that since the last time that we had a debate on it, the Minister has managed to get the Government to move, for which we are extremely grateful. Former child migrants across the world have contacted me in the last few months to talk about how grateful they are for that movement. However, there are outstanding concerns and worries, and as the Minister knows, many of the people affected are getting older and so time is of the essence.

It is almost a year since the report by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse—IICSA—shone a damning spotlight on the severe sexual, physical and emotional abuse experienced by many of the thousands of child migrants sent abroad unaccompanied as a result of the policy of child migration practised by successive post-war Governments. The report exposes the harrowing abuse that took place before the children travelled, during the journey and after they migrated. It often continued for years and took place at the hands of more than one perpetrator. For some children, the most devastating aspect of the experience was being lied to about their family background and even about whether their parents and siblings were alive or dead.

The experience that many of the former child migrants had has had a lifelong impact on their physical and mental wellbeing, their educational attainment and their future employment prospects. The child migration programmes effectively ended some people's lives just as they were beginning. Over the last few months, I have also been contacted by many of the partners and children of former child migrants to talk about the impact that there has been on them, too. This is not just about children losing their parents and parents losing their children; it is about generations being separated—grandparents being separated from grandchildren and young people growing up and not knowing any family beyond their parents at all.

While acknowledging the failures of the institutions, including charities and churches, that were involved in the process of migrating children, the report, as the Minister knows, overwhelmingly concluded that Her Majesty's Government were primarily to blame for the existence of the programmes after the second world war and that successive British Governments, of all political persuasions, allowed them to remain in place despite a catalogue of evidence showing the treatment that children were receiving. That is surely one of the most shameful periods in British history.

However, things went silent until well into the 1980s, when Dr Margaret Humphreys and the Child Migrants Trust sought to bring the matter to public attention. The policy position maintained throughout the 1990s and 2000s was that the Government may have been aware of

"allegations of physical and sexual abuse",

but that

"any such allegations would be a matter for the Australian authorities",

as former Prime Minister John Major put it. It was not until 2010—it was nine years ago to the day on Sunday—that then Prime Minister Gordon Brown publicly apologised to former child migrants on behalf of Her Majesty's Government and established the family restoration fund, which was endowed with £6 million to help former child migrants to reunite with their families in Britain.

Despite that scheme, IICSA found last year that the UK Government had failed to provide adequate redress to the more than 2,000 surviving former child migrants and it recommended that financial redress be established without delay, with payments beginning within 12 months; the relevant date is 1 March 2019. The report recommended an equal award for each applicant, on the basis that they were all exposed to equal risk of abuse. Given the age and ill health of surviving former child migrants, it stated that action was urgently needed. However, it took the Government almost 10 months to publish a formal response to the recommendations. During that time, 36 former child migrants died, meaning that they would never see the justice that they so badly deserved or the redress that they were owed.

When the Government did publish their response, they accepted the recommendations on financial redress, for which we are extremely grateful, and confirmed that they would establish a scheme to ensure that each surviving former child migrant receives an ex gratia payment as soon as possible. It was also very welcome that the Government acknowledged that the delay in establishing the scheme had had a major impact, and stated at the time that they would accept claims in respect of any former child migrant who was alive on 1 March 2018, when IICSA's report was published.

I was alerted to the fact that the scheme had happened by the Minister's office. I was alerted to the fact that the details of the ex gratia payment scheme had been published via the Child Migrants Trust. The details appeared on its website on 31 January 2019. It was stated that each eligible former British child migrant would receive £20,000 and that the Child Migrants Trust would support applicants in establishing their identity as former British child migrants. I understood that payments would then be administered by the NHS Business Services Authority.

I have a number of questions for the Minister, which I sent to her in advance; I hope that that will help her to answer them today. They are not my questions, but questions that have been raised with me by the many former child migrants who survive around the world. As the Minister can imagine, they were delighted when details of the scheme were published, but that delight quickly turned to anxiety because many of the details are not currently in the public domain.

First, many former child migrants are very concerned about the lack of involvement that they have had in the Government's response to IICSA and the development of the payment scheme. I do understand that the Minister was alive to the possibility that some of the former child migrants needed to see justice and see it quickly, but it would be very helpful if she could tell us what consultation has happened with former child migrants. The president of the International Association of Former Child Migrants

[Lisa Nandy]

and their Families wrote to the Home Secretary on 10 January to voice concerns that there had been no consultation with survivors of the programmes and to request a meeting regarding the Government's response, but to date no response has been received to that letter.

This Minister will be aware, because I have raised it many times in the House, including with the Prime Minister, that there has been confusion about which Department was responsible for this issue in the past. That has been one of the problems that the former child migrants have had. It seems to me that those people who have spent decades feeling and being ignored by the British Government are entitled to a speedy response from their Government now, when they are seeking answers towards the end of their lives. I would be grateful if the Minister would acknowledge those concerns and agree to meet representatives of the international association of child migrants and the Child Migrants Trust to discuss these issues further.

I have also been asked to raise concerns about the payment amount. It is unclear how the figure of £20,000 was reached. IICSA's report stated that any financial redress scheme should make a

"real, immediate and lasting difference to the lives of the former child migrants."

Without any consultation, can the Minister be confident that the £20,000 amount lives up to that recommendation? Could she tell us how it was arrived at? By comparison, the average payment issued to claimants under the recently established Australian scheme, which is open to former British child migrants, is the equivalent of £43,000, with a cap at £82,000.

The Government did respond to a question that I tabled on the methodology that was used and stated that the methodology was based on the Northern Ireland historical institutional abuse inquiry, which in 2018 had recommended the amount of £20,000 for former child migrants sent from Northern Ireland. However, I have been unable to find any information from the Northern Ireland Executive about what methodology was used and how this figure was calculated, so I would be very grateful if the Minister could explain how the amount was arrived at.

I would also be grateful for some clarity about the tax arrangements, because there is little detail on the Child Migrants Trust website and the Child Migrants Trust is unclear about the process. Will the payment be taxable in the UK or in any other country where the claimants live and will receive payment? After all this time, and many broken promises, there is not a great deal of trust out there—there is a huge amount of anxiety. At the very least, the former child migrants who have suffered appallingly at the hands of successive Governments are entitled to know from this Government what they will actually receive and whether the payment will affect any other benefits that they are receiving.

On the application process, I am aware from my work with the Child Migrants Trust that it has excellent contacts throughout the child migrant community and an established track record in verifying child migrants for eligibility for the use of its services and for redress schemes in other countries. I can well understand why the Government were keen to ensure that it took a

central role in the process, but I am concerned about whether it has the capacity to administer the new scheme, particularly in the timescale set out by IICSA, which would give it only a few days to process the applications.

There is also concern about the Child Migrants Trust's ongoing capacity issues. As I understand, it has not been offered any additional resources to deal with the increased workload. It has already received hundreds of inquiries about the scheme and, with an estimated 2,000 potential claimants, it is important that it has the resources to handle claims in an efficient, thorough and sensitive way to ensure that the people who are eligible for the payment actually get it.

Given that the payment scheme is likely to introduce new former child migrants to the work of the Child Migrants Trust, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in demand for its other services, such as the family restoration fund and counselling. Will the Minister look at the trust's long-term funding to make sure that it can do what the Government have asked it to do and continue to provide vital ongoing services to former child migrants?

There are concerns about the eligibility criteria. I have been contacted by several individuals who were migrated with a family member or guardian present on their journey and who may not be eligible under the scheme. The Government have stated that

"children who went overseas with their parents or guardians, or were sent overseas"

with apparent permission from

"their parents or guardians, are clearly in a different category: they were not the responsibility of local authorities or Government organisations in the United Kingdom and their parents or guardians made the arrangements voluntarily."

Several people have contacted me to say that they disagree with that position. They say that from the early 1960s, some child migrant schemes arranged for children to be accompanied on the journey by migrating parents before being taken into a child migrant institution. Once in an institution, they were treated in exactly the same way as other children and exposed to the same risk of physical, sexual and psychological abuse as every other child.

Others have pointed out that excluding those

"sent overseas by their parents or guardians"

could be problematic. They tell me that after 1946, the British Government required all British child migrants to have the signed approval of their parents or guardian before they could be sent. IICSA heard evidence of some cases where carers illegally signed those approvals, but the authorisations were overwhelmingly signed by parents or guardians. By signing their approval for children to go, are the parents now deemed to have effectively authorised them to be sent and if so, will those children be ineligible for payment?

There is an urgent need for clarity and detail about the eligibility criteria for the scheme to ensure that the maximum amount of people put at risk by the programmes can receive the payment. Those who are deemed ineligible are entitled to a clear and sensitive explanation for that decision.

I am concerned about the way that the payment scheme was announced and the amount of promotion that has taken place. As I understand, the details of the scheme were announced solely in the form of a note

published on the Child Migrants Trust website. There was no oral or written statement to outline the details of the scheme to Parliament and there was no press release from the Department of Health and Social Care, despite the scheme potentially costing a significant amount of public money. The details of the scheme are still not published on the Department's website or on gov.uk.

It seems that the job of raising awareness of the scheme has fallen completely on the shoulders of the Child Migrants Trust, which is doing an excellent job of using its networks to promote the scheme, despite no extra resources having been committed to help it. In answer to a question that I asked about the establishment of a communications strategy, the Government indicated that they had publicised the scheme through the high commissions of receiving countries. Can the Minister provide further details about that work and what it hopes to achieve? Can the Minister also tell us what the Government's future communication strategy will be?

The future funding of the Child Migrants Trust and the family restoration fund is a key concern. The Minister will be familiar with the work of the family restoration fund and its life-changing impact. It has been funded by successive Governments, including this one, and it continues to make a real difference. Since it was established in 2010, it has facilitated 1,248 visits. The IICSA report states clearly that

"the establishment of the Redress Scheme should not be used as a reason for reducing funding for the Child Migrants Trust or the Family Restoration Fund".

In the Government's response to the report, they seemed to agree and recognised

"that the Family Restoration Fund continues to provide a valuable service."

However, they also stated that they

"will continue the Fund until the end of the scheme, by which time the Fund will have provided over £8 million to support reunions, over more than a decade."

When I asked about future funding for the family restoration fund, I was told that it was a matter for the upcoming spending review, which has caused real concern that it will cease to exist after its funding ends later this year. The Minister previously extended funding in 2014 and 2017. The fund should not end until there is no further demand. In fact, the findings of the IICSA report underline how vital all the services provided for former child migrants are. It would be unfair if child migrants applying for the payment scheme in 2019 could also apply for restoration fund support but those applying afterwards could not benefit from that service.

The Minister and I have had public and private conversations about the raw emotional impact of the scheme on child migrants. I am grateful to her for listening to our concerns about the timing of the announcement that compensation would be made and for making sure that no bad news was delivered just before Christmas when many people are struggling to cope.

The Minister will be aware, however, that even such a positive announcement can open up some difficult emotions for people who are dealing with it, which might bring them into contact with services for the first time. This may be the moment when, after a lifetime apart from their families, people think that they need and wish to seek support as they come to the end. A clear commitment

from the Minister that the money provided for the redress scheme will not be used as an excuse not to fund the family restoration fund, and a longer term commitment to the fund, would be extremely welcome.

All over the world, people are watching this debate who were taken from their families at the beginning of their lives. They have had to fight all the way to survive and for justice. There have been many moments in their lives when we collectively, as a country, have fallen well short of what they deserved from us by kicking the issue into the long grass and denying them the justice and support that they were entitled to. That has caused them severe harm, but they are still there—fighting and campaigning. As we bring this shameful chapter in British history to a close, the least that we can do is issue them with the payment, the clarity and the support that they deserve.

4.49 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

First of all, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) for securing this debate, for her excellent contribution to it and, of course, for her campaigning on this issue over many years. We have seen today her continuing tenacity, and the importance of continuing to raise these vital matters on behalf of the victims. She described the inquiry report as damning, and said that it exposed harrowing abuse and that this issue was exacerbated by the lies that were told about it. She is right that this was a shameful episode for our country.

My hon. Friend was also right that the issue went beyond the abuse that people suffered; they were also wrongly separated from their families for generations. Think about what it would mean for someone to be separated from their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. It is very difficult to appreciate just what kind of hole that would leave in their life, and it is also very difficult to appreciate just how harmful that is. I add my voice to hers, and would like to show my appreciation of the courage of those who have been affected by the child migration programme: the 130,000-plus British children who were deported without their consent—sometimes, as we know, even without their parents' consent—and the estimated 4,000 unaccompanied child migrants who, as we have heard, experienced sexual, physical and emotional abuse as a result of this devastating policy, which was practised by successive post-war Governments until 1974.

As was highlighted by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse report on the child migration programme, and in the accounts that we have heard today and in previous debates, these children suffered abuse before, during and after their migration, often over a period of many years and sometimes at the hands of more than one perpetrator. As we know, for many of them, that has had a lasting—indeed, lifelong—impact on their physical and mental wellbeing, their educational attainment and their employment prospects—in effect, their whole life. No one can fail to be moved by the personal accounts that we have all heard from those who suffered abuse, and I am sure that we are all united in our desire to do everything we can to put right those wrongs, as far as it is possible to do so.

[Justin Madders]

There is no doubt that the victims of the child migration programme suffered for too long at the hands of successive Governments, and that successive Governments chose to turn a blind eye. Of course, these people also had to wait far too long for an apology. It saddens me that that took until 2010, when Gordon Brown, the then Prime Minister, formally acknowledged that successive Governments had failed in their duty of care.

Gordon Brown also established the £6 billion family restoration fund to help former child migrants to reunite with their families, so that they could build relationships, be involved in significant family events, or even urgently visit relatives at times of crisis. However, as we have heard from last year's inquiry, despite this scheme, the UK Government have failed to provide adequate redress to the more than 2,000 surviving child migrants.

I am sure we all agree that victims have been let down all their lives by successive Governments missing opportunities to take action over the years. It is with regret that we note that it took more than nine months for the Government to respond to the inquiry report, especially given that the inquiry stressed the importance of urgent action because of the age and ill health of some of the surviving child migrants.

I welcome the Government's acknowledgement that the delay in establishing the scheme was unacceptable, and that they will accept claims on behalf of former child migrants who were alive when the report was published last March but subsequently passed away. The report recommended that financial redress be established without delay, and that payments be made within 12 months. As we know, that would be by this Friday, 1 March. I share the frustration felt by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan about the details of the ex gratia payment scheme having been published only on 31 January, and only on the Child Migrants Trust website. As she acknowledged, although the trust has excellent contacts throughout the former child migrant community, we need to learn from the Government whether there are any further things that they can do to publicise the scheme, to ensure that nobody is overlooked.

I share my hon. Friend's concern that former British child migrants have raised legitimate points about their lack of involvement in the development of the payment scheme. In any case of abuse, it is absolutely vital that the victims' voices be heard. In this case, they were not heard at the time of the abuse and they have not been heard since; it is important that they are heard throughout the whole inquiry process, which includes the determination of the payment to be made.

I hope that the Minister will say whether she is confident that the £20,000 figure will provide adequate redress. As my hon. Friend said, so far there has been little clarity about how that figure was arrived at. People absolutely need transparency at all times, not least when they have suffered in the way that we have heard about today.

My hon. Friend also asked reasonable questions about the taxable status of these payments, and so on. I hope that the Minister can respond to those questions, so that former child migrants do not suffer any more uncertainty about whether they will qualify for the scheme. I hope that he will also provide clarity about the eligibility criteria, as my hon. Friend requested,

because there were child migrants who were sent to the receiving institutions with permission from parents or guardians, but as my hon. Friend clearly set out, no matter the vehicle by which children arrived at those institutions, the abuse that they suffered within them was the same. We hope that there will be no further delay to victims of the child migration programme receiving the redress they are entitled to. Will the Minister say whether she is confident that the Child Migrants Trust has the resources to administer the scheme? If it does not, what further measures will be put in place?

I share my hon. Friend's concerns that the Government's pledge to continue the family restoration fund until the end of the redress scheme does not meet the inquiry report's expectation that the continuation of the scheme will not lead to reduced funding for the Child Migrants Trust or the family restoration fund. I hope that the Minister will take this opportunity to provide reassurance that the Government will continue to provide funding until the family restoration fund is no longer needed.

In conclusion, as a politician, it angers me to hear the inquiry's conclusion that the main reason for the failure of Her Majesty's Government to take action to end the child migration programme after the second world war—despite the evidence of ill treatment and abuse, including sexual abuse—was politics. I hope that in today's politics we are a very long way away from that place—a place where the importance of continuing relations with other Governments and with charitable organisations, and the need to avoid reputational risk, was prioritised over the wellbeing of our children. The politicians of today may have our differences, but we must never again allow the suffering of children and their search for justice to be subservient to the politics of the day.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Unusually, due to important parliamentary business elsewhere, we will have the Opposition spokespeople in a different order. We have heard from Her Majesty's official Opposition; now we will hear from Stuart C. McDonald for the Scottish National party.

4.57 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Thanks very much, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to speak. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and I genuinely thank you for offering me the opportunity to speak very briefly.

Clearly, it will be difficult for me to sum up a debate that I have only heard a tiny fraction of, but I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing it. She secured a similar debate something like seven or eight months ago. She has done Parliament a favour by drawing attention to this issue; most importantly, of course, in doing so, she has helped the survivors of these horrible child migration programmes. I thank her for bringing this issue to Parliament once again.

As well as the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, which we discussed last time, there is the inquiry established by the Northern Ireland Executive and chaired by Sir Anthony Hart, who has also reported in detail on the child migration programmes, and the Scottish child abuse inquiry under Lady Smith, which is ongoing. As was well discussed and well established in our previous

debate, even if they are looked at by the standards of the time, these programmes were appallingly ill-conceived, and the actions and supervision of those involved fell drastically short of the standards that were expected. Concerns about the programmes were ignored, and little effort was made to ensure that the children being “exported”, to use that horrible term, were safe.

The conclusions of the IICSA report were stark: successive Governments had failed to respond properly to concerns that were raised, and the programmes were allowed by successive British Governments to remain in place, despite a catalogue of evidence showing that children were suffering ill treatment and abuse, including sexual abuse. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), talked about some of the reasons why these programmes were allowed to continue, including politics, which chimed with what we discussed last time.

After the Ross report in 1956, nothing was done. It is stomach-churning to read the IICSA report’s conclusion that that was because of the patronage of persons of influence and position. It is clear that in some cases, the avoidance of embarrassment and reputational risk was more important than the institutional responsibilities towards migrated children. That is a truly damning indictment of successive Governments.

Both the Northern Ireland and the IICSA reports recommended compensation payments for those who had been sent abroad under the child migration programmes over and above any compensation for other wrongs and abuses suffered. The Government’s announcement of the compensation is very welcome indeed, and it is only fair to reflect on the fact that it has been welcomed by groups working on behalf of survivors, including the Child Migrants Trust and the International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families, and also by former child migrants themselves, who have given evidence to the inquiry.

It is important to hear more from the Government. A statement would have been ideal. We need to know much more about the detail. How has the compensation been calculated? What is the timing? How are folk to apply? Will the Government continue to work with all the groups to ensure that the compensation scheme operates smoothly and reaches as many survivors as possible? After the Windrush scandal, there have been welcome announcements about compensation and redress, but the proof is always in the pudding, and there have already been trials and tribulations in getting that up and running. We do not want that repeated here.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. I apologise once again for not having been able to play a full part in the debate, and I again thank the hon. Member for Wigan for securing it.

5.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I would normally start by saying that it is a pleasure to engage in the debate, but to be honest this has not been the most comfortable of subjects on which to speak on behalf of the Government. As we have heard, this was a shameful episode in our history, and all the more shaming that it was under successive Governments of different colours. I think everyone in the room would wish to dissociate themselves from that kind of behaviour.

However, I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on bringing the matter to my attention, again. She has been my conscience on this. Quite rightly, because, as she mentioned, we had the recommendation almost a year ago and it took time to get cross-Government agreement on how to take it forward. Having got that agreement, it was my desire that we make progress with the implementation but, by definition, that has left a number of questions unanswered. I hope that some of the points I make today will answer some of those outstanding questions and settle any anxiety that the child migrants have. Ultimately, they have not been dealt the best cards over the years and it is important that we do our very best to redress the situation. I pledge to continue to do my best in that regard.

The hon. Lady rightly highlighted that there was confusion about who owned the policy, and that is one reason it has taken so long. This all came about because of the child abuse inquiry, which sits under the Home Office, but historically the Department of Health has had responsibility for child migrants generally, and that led to the confusion. I really hope that we can settle the matter more formally, so that we can have more certainty for the child migrants. While I am in this place, the hon. Lady can rest assured that she can always nag me if things go awry, and history tells me that she will. All power to her elbow for doing that, because it is important that we do this right.

Once we had made the decision to make the payments, it was important to make the announcement quickly, not least because some of the individuals are elderly—I am advised that the eldest is 102. Speed is of the essence, to ensure that everyone can get some enjoyment from the payments.

The hon. Lady has once again demonstrated her commitment to ensuring that the welfare of those children is not forgotten; we should never forget what was done in our name. The policy was misguided and wrong, and has caused suffering and distress. The conclusion of the child abuse inquiry was that payment should be made not because people were exposed to abuse—compensation exists for that—but because of the very fact that organisations of the state sent the children away without consent. It is in that spirit that we have adopted the recommendation, recognising that organisations of the state exposed the children to harm, regardless of whether any harm materialised. As a consequence, we have taken the opportunity to announce the payments.

All Members have made very fair points about how the scheme has been communicated. That came about, again, because of the speed with which we wanted to make the announcement. It is also worth noting that the Child Migrants Trust has extremely good relationships with the affected people, so although it was not bells and whistles, we were, in a way, using the right channels to get to those who needed to know. However, we will reflect on what has been said and consider whether and how best to disseminate more information, recognising that not all those affected are necessarily in contact with the trust and it might be a pleasant surprise for them to know about the scheme.

As I mentioned, the payments are on the basis of being exposed to risk; they are not compensation for abuse. We have announced that each former child migrant will receive £20,000 in recognition of that exposure. It is only fair that, in recognition of the passage of time

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

since the recommendation, we backdate the payments to 1 March 2018. As the hon. Lady mentioned, a number of the individuals have passed away since that date, and we will honour any claim made in respect of a deceased migrant.

Lisa Nandy: The wider communication of the policy is important precisely because of that group of people who have passed away. I imagine that their relatives would be much less likely to look at the Child Migrants Trust website and much more likely to look at gov.uk or the Department of Health and Social Care's site. If the Minister would at least consider putting something on the Government's website, that would be helpful.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will take that point away. Part of me thinks that it will be appropriate to do that once we have all the details written down; none the less, I will reflect on what the hon. Lady says, because she is right. The very act of making the payments is in itself an acknowledgement that the Government have failed their own citizens. If individuals are no longer here to enjoy the benefits of the payments, they would have wanted their families to do so, and we need to make every effort to ensure that they can.

As I have said, this is not compensation; it is a payment for the fact that the individuals were deported by organisations of the state and were put at risk of harm. There are other routes to compensation for migrants who suffered harm or injury and this payment is in addition to and does not interfere with that; it does not affect the rights of any individual to pursue avenues of compensation. The scheme provides for an equal award for every applicant, regardless of income. Essentially, we want to make it simple, and to get the payments out to those affected.

Setting the amount was difficult, because it is impossible to put a figure on the costs, the damage and the harm; in that sense, it is difficult to come up with any calculation. But we have engaged with the Child Migrants Trust, which many migrants trust to represent their views, and have consulted it on the design of the scheme. We did not want to go through a formal consultation process for exactly the reasons we have discussed: we wanted to act promptly and in a way that would get the money out as soon as possible. In setting the sum at £20,000, we have taken note of the recommendation of Sir Anthony Hart's report into institutional abuse in Northern Ireland. He recommended that the payment should be a sum sufficient to recognise the injustice that young children suffered through being sent to a far-away land and losing their sense of identity as a result. He recommended the figure of £20,000, and on that basis, we considered it to be an appropriate figure for a UK-wide scheme. Again, it is important that we do not have any discrimination between the four nations; it is right that we deliver this scheme in a way that is consistent across them.

Lisa Nandy: It would be helpful to those child migrants if we could get some clarity about why Sir Anthony Hart came up with that amount. The aim is not necessarily to question that amount, but if we are seeking to put a figure on the level of harm and dispossession that was

caused, those child migrants would appreciate—and indeed are entitled to—an explanation of how the amount was arrived at. If the Minister's office could help us find out how that figure was arrived at in Northern Ireland, that would help many of those child migrants to put together an important piece of the puzzle.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is a fair challenge. With the caveat that any figure would not be adequate to compensate for harm, some methodology about why that figure was arrived at would be helpful.

The issue of eligibility has been raised on a number of occasions. The only condition that needs to be met is that a claimant is a former British child migrant sent from the United Kingdom and Crown dependencies before 1971, meaning anyone who was below school leaving age and was sent by a church, state, voluntary or other organisation to one of the receiving countries: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia. However—to answer one of the hon. Lady's questions—they must not have been accompanied by an adult family member or guardian, sent by an adult family member or guardian, or sent to live with a member of their birth family, because this payment is rooted in the fact that these were people who were sent by organisations of the state. I recognise the point made by various hon. Members that those sent by family members may also have been exposed to abuse, but again, the scheme does not alter those people's routes for seeking compensation in other ways. This scheme is the Government taking responsibility for decisions made in their name, rather than for those made by families.

We have kept the eligibility criteria as simple as possible, to make the process of claiming the payment as simple as possible. Those eligibility criteria are the same as those being used for the family restoration fund, and are the same criteria that the Child Migrants Trust has used over many decades to determine who can access its services. Clearly, we want to make the application process as simple as possible, and as the hon. Lady has mentioned, we have asked the Child Migrants Trust to act as the first point of contact for child migrants who wish to apply for payments. I have heard the hon. Lady's points about resource: we are in close contact with the Child Migrants Trust and give it support as appropriate. I hope, given the extensive network of contacts that the trust has, that this work should not prove massively onerous; in fact, in some respects, it may be helpful to the trust's wider work.

Lisa Nandy: It would be helpful to the Child Migrants Trust if the Minister were to agree to a further meeting with the trust to discuss some of those outstanding concerns. I would be grateful for an assurance that she will do that.

Jackie Doyle-Price: We will of course continue to engage with the Child Migrants Trust, especially given that we want to be sure that in rolling out this scheme, we are getting to as many people as possible and doing it as efficiently as possible. I do not think anyone is better placed to advise us than the Child Migrants Trust.

The trust will reach out to all those who it has supported in the past to help them to apply for the payment. I know that it has already promoted the

scheme widely, and it has also contacted all of the known sending agencies—those organisations that were responsible for sending children. We are aware that there has been extensive coverage in the Australian media, but we will look at where there is a need for further active communication, and how best to do that. We expect the high commissions in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Zimbabwe to have extensive contact programmes, making sure that they are using their networks to make people aware of the scheme. Those former child migrants who have not previously been supported by the Child Migrants Trust will need to go through a separate application process, but the trust has given undertakings that it will help those people to do so. We have evidence that a number of child migrants who were not previously in contact with the trust have made contact, which is an indication that the message is going out. We have put some details of the scheme on the Government's website, but I will make sure that we keep that website properly updated so that it is signposting people to where they can access help.

The hon. Member for Wigan is right that although the Child Migrants Trust will accept applications, the actual application payments will be made by the NHS Business Services Authority. The aim is to make those payments within 60 days, but more quickly if at all possible: we are determined to get these funds to those who should benefit from them as quickly as possible. Some reference was made to tax and benefit issues, and I am clear that every one of those beneficiaries should receive that £20,000 in its entirety, free of tax and separate from benefits, but that is not entirely in our gift. We are having conversations with overseas Governments about that issue, and we will also look at what needs to be done for those who are resident here so that they are not adversely affected.

Again, part and parcel of having made an announcement very quickly and then trying to get a scheme going is that we do not have firm answers on all of these subjects. I assure the hon. Lady that I am determined that these people should get this sum in its entirety, and I will do my best to make sure that that is the case. It should be noted that the majority of recipients live in Australia, with significant numbers living in other countries and only a very small number living in the UK. Experience tells us that the Australian Government are sympathetic to this group of people, so I hope that we can make representations that are received sympathetically, even though we have no power to dictate the tax, welfare and benefits arrangements of other countries.

I hope that hon. Members are reassured by some of the details that we have announced. Clearly, the scheme is not as buttoned down and finished at this stage as we would like it to be, but the fact that we have proceeded to implement this decision as soon as it was taken is an indication of how committed we as a Government are—and, in fact, all political parties are—to putting right a wrong that, frankly, has been a cause of shame for so many of us. Nothing can repair the damage that has been done to those individuals. We can acknowledge it, we can apologise, and we can make these payments,

but the most important thing that all of us in this room can do is to make sure that nothing so unjust ever happens in the name of the state again. At a time when some of our colleagues are distracted by other issues, this debate is a reminder of why so many of us got involved in politics in the first place—to fight for justice, to right wrongs, and to champion the rights of people who perhaps have not had them championed before.

I will conclude by again congratulating the hon. Member for Wigan, who has been dogged in her determination to do right by this group of people. In doing so, she has made my life uncomfortable from time to time, but I thank her for it, because that is what this place is all about. We will make sure that we deliver as we have promised.

5.18 pm

Lisa Nandy: I am very grateful to the Minister for that comprehensive response and for taking so many interventions. I am grateful to all the Members who have spoken in the debate. I have given her a hard time over the past year or so, and she has taken it on the chin and responded. It was she who came to this place and said that it was incredibly difficult to get things through Government with everything going on with Brexit. I have seen that for myself—we have all seen it—and I know she has fought hard to get us here. I thank her on the record for that and for her ongoing commitment to try to resolve the outstanding issues.

There was one issue about the family restoration fund that I might write to the Minister about to try to get some more clarity, given the uncertainty about the ongoing nature of that scheme. I was glad to hear about the level of urgency within Government to try to resolve some of the issues and the ongoing commitment to meet and work with the Child Migrants Trust as we move forward. I suspect that this debate will not be the last time she hears from me on this subject.

I am reminded by the Minister's closing remarks that far too many people do not have a voice. I hope that those who have been watching today—the people affected and the families of those who are sadly no longer with us—will feel that at least they have had a voice today because of the efforts of some of us here in this room. I hope we have reassured them that they will continue to have a voice going forward. The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse was established by the Prime Minister, the then Home Secretary, to learn the lessons from the past and ensure that such things never happen again. It seems to me that that cannot be done without seeking to right some of those historic injustices. We have made a small step forward to keeping children safe in the future here today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the former British child migrants payment scheme.

5.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.

121WH

*Former British Child Migrants:
Payment Scheme*

26 FEBRUARY 2019

*Former British Child Migrants:
Payment Scheme*

122WH

Written Statements

Tuesday 26 February 2019

CABINET OFFICE

No-deal EU Exit Implications

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): On 14 February 2019, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), made a commitment in the House that I would meet with the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (right hon. Anna Soubry) on behalf of the Government, to identify information to be published relating to the implications for trade and business of a no-deal exit from the European Union on 29 March 2019.

These discussions have now taken place. In the light of these discussions, I am depositing in the Libraries of both Houses the following document: “Implications for Trade and Business of a No Deal Exit from the European Union on 29 March”.

This document summarises Government activity to prepare for no deal as a contingency plan, and provides an assessment of the implications of a no-deal exit for trade and businesses, given the preparations that have been made.

The Government’s primary aim remains to ensure that the UK leaves the EU on 29 March with a negotiated deal which will honour the result of the referendum. However, as a responsible Government, we continue to plan for all eventualities. Guidance for businesses and citizens on how to prepare for a no-deal scenario can be found on the Government’s exit guidance website at: www.gov.uk/government/brexit.

[HCWS1361]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Prespa Agreement and North Macedonia’s NATO Accession

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Her Majesty’s Government have received by note verbale a formal notice from the Government in

Skopje that the Republic of Macedonia has changed its name to the Republic of North Macedonia. This follows the entering into force of the Prespa agreement. The UK body that deals with geographical names, the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN), recommended that we endorse the change. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs agreed.

The name issue

The name issue had been a matter of dispute between Macedonia and Greece since 1991, when Greece refused to recognise the new state as the “Republic of Macedonia” owing to sensitivities over use of the term Macedonia. The Republic of Macedonia became the 181st member of the United Nations, but under the provisional term, the “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”. Until the Prespa agreement came into force, this was the designation used by the country in all international fora. In bilateral communications, the United Kingdom referred to the country by its constitutional name, the ‘Republic of Macedonia’.

The Prespa agreement

Under the auspices of the United Nations, negotiating teams from both countries reached a settlement. The Foreign Ministers of Greece and Macedonia signed the Prespa agreement on 17 June 2018. The entering into force of the Prespa agreement earlier this month resolves the dispute. Under Article 1 (3) of the agreement, the Republic of Macedonia is henceforth the Republic of North Macedonia.

NATO Accession

NATO Allies, including the United Kingdom, signed North Macedonia’s Accession protocol on 6 February. Greece’s Parliament ratified North Macedonia’s NATO Accession Protocol on 8 February. The Greek Government then confirmed to the Macedonian Government that all necessary steps to ratify the Prespa agreement were complete. Her Majesty’s Government are taking forward the process for UK ratification of North Macedonia’s NATO Accession Protocol. This will involve laying the Accession Protocol before Parliament for 21 sitting days for scrutiny (as stipulated in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010). Once this process is complete, and provided Parliament has no objections, Her Majesty’s Government will deposit their instrument of ratification.

[HCWS1360]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 26 February 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE.....	143	FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE—	
Equal Rights Coalition	157	<i>continued</i>	
Human Rights	157	Topical Questions	159
Iran's Ballistic Missile Programme	148	Transatlantic Alliance	143
Israel and Palestine	154	UK Soft Power.....	145
Leaving the EU: Diplomatic Network.....	155	Zimbabwe	152
Persecution of Christians	150		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 26 February 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE.....	9WS
No-deal EU Exit Implications	9WS
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE.....	9WS
Prespa Agreement and North Macedonia's	
NATO Accession	9WS

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 26 February 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 143] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Leaving the European Union [Col. 165]
Statement—(Prime Minister)

Terms of Withdrawal from the EU (Referendum) (No. 2) [Col. 202]
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Geraint Davies)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

National Health Service (Prohibition of Fax Machines and Pagers) [Col. 203]
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Alan Mak)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Estimates (5th allotted day)
Department for Education [Col. 206]
Department for Work and Pensions [Col. 245]
Estimates agreed to

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism [Col. 280]
Motion—(Sajid Javid)—agreed to

Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults: Care Homes [Col. 306]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Unhealthy Housing: Cost to the NHS [Col. 47WH]
Animal Rescue Homes [Col. 71WH]
Global Education for the Most Marginalised [Col. 78WH]
Environment Agency Permits [Col. 101WH]
Former British Child Migrants: Payment Scheme [Col. 107WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 9WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
