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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 24 April 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

CABINET OFFICE AND THE CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER

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

Government Subcontractors and Suppliers: Payment

1. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that all Government suppliers and subcontractors are paid on time. [910471]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): It is important to all suppliers, not least small businesses, that they are paid on time. That is why I have announced that, from this September, we will exclude suppliers from winning contracts if they fail to pay their subcontractors on time. Just this month, I contacted all suppliers to remind them of this intention.

Mark Pawsey: I welcome what the Minister has just said, but a significant proportion of Government procurement is on construction projects, where there are often poor payment practices, such as those exposed during the collapse of Carillion. The Federation of Small Businesses' "Fair Pay Fair Play" campaign, which carries the message that everyone deserves to be paid on time, is asking for those projects to be made the subject of separate project bank accounts. Is the Minister considering that?

Oliver Dowden: Yes. My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Government already use project bank accounts on all construction projects, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so. That is just one way of ensuring our underlying objective of prompt and fair payment. It sits alongside initiatives such as paying our suppliers on time, excluding late payers and appointing prompt payment non-executive directors in all Departments.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that small businesses are the backbone of our economy, will the Minister outline when we can expect to see the follow-through of the proposed policy whereby suppliers will be unable to win Government contracts unless they are seen to be making prompt payments?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to remind the House of that commitment. I announced in November that we will be bringing that policy into practice from September this year. The policy will mean that companies will face being excluded from Government contracts if they fail to pay their suppliers on time in two consecutive quarters.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which Government Departments have the best record in paying their suppliers on time, and which have the worst?

Oliver Dowden: I can tell my hon. Friend that the latest data shows that 10 of the 16 Government Departments were meeting the target of paying 90% of suppliers within five days, and 10 were also meeting the target of at least 96% of invoices within the 30-day target, so there is a good record overall.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): The Minister's own Department has seen a threefold increase in late payments over the last couple of years. As we know, the Government are diverted from their day jobs with daydreams of a new Prime Minister, and this distracted Government are raising incompetence to a completely new level. We have seen that they are careless when paying small and medium-sized enterprises that provide services to the public, and those SMEs are the backbone of our economy. Yet the Government are very careful when it comes to outsourcing to wounded giants such as Interserve or failed dinosaurs such as Carillion. Is it not time that the Minister and his Department got their act together?

Oliver Dowden: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am dreaming of nothing but securing my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in her continued position as Prime Minister.

Jon Trickett: "It says here."

Oliver Dowden: Sadly, I do not have a note on that point.

I can also reassure the hon. Gentleman on his point regarding prompt payments in my own Department, the Cabinet Office. According to the latest figures, in March we paid 88% of all our suppliers within five days and 98% within 30 days—a perfectly credible record.

Nancy Astor: Centenary of Election

2. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What plans the Government have to use the centenary of Nancy Astor's election to encourage more women to stand for public office. [910472]

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): We are all indebted to this groundbreaking Conservative Member of Parliament, who won her seat the year after women first got the vote. The Government are using the suffrage centenary fund to support some 350 projects, including training in political leadership in Bradford and Birmingham, and skills sessions in the east midlands, west midlands and London.

Mrs Murray: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming plans to commemorate Lady Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons, with a statue in Plymouth?

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely. I welcome the extraordinary efforts of the campaigners who have achieved funding for a statue of Nancy Astor through public donations, particularly as there are—let us be frank—too few statues celebrating and commemorating the amazing contribution that women have made in helping to shape our nation. I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that she has done to support this project.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Can we also remember the two pioneering women who closely followed Nancy Astor: the Liberal Margaret Wintringham and the great MP for East Ham, Susan Lawrence?

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely—I am happy to do that. As I said, there are too few memorials and commemorations of the great efforts and contributions made to society by women throughout the ages, and I am very happy to congratulate all those who do their bit for public service.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Two years ago, we celebrated 50 years since Winnie Ewing was elected to the House of Commons; perhaps that should be reflected here. I do not know what the Government would do to celebrate Nancy Astor that they would not do to celebrate Constance Markievicz, who was the first woman to be elected to Parliament. The Scottish Government recently held a consultation on electoral reform that specifically included ways to improve gender and minority representation. Will this Government do the same thing and bring forward real proposals?

Brandon Lewis: If I remember correctly, Constance Markievicz did not take her seat, but as I said, I congratulate anyone who contributes to public life. We must all work to highlight and promote the fantastic work done by women across our country over the years in a range of public service roles, which would be a good way to encourage more people to contribute in the future.

Cyber-security

3. **Neil O'Brien** (Harborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber security of public and private sector organisations. [910473]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): While the Government can manage and have been managing the security risk, it is essential that the cyber-security and engineering flaws in Huawei products are fixed. The National Cyber Security Centre has set out the improvements we expect the company to make and will not compromise on the improvements we need to see, in particular sustained evidence of better software engineering and cyber-security.

Neil O'Brien: Will the Minister update the House on the distinction the Government make between different types of infrastructure equipment from Huawei, and how that will be used to respond to the centre's recommendations?

Mr Lidington: We have the independent Huawei cyber-security evaluation centre to look at what the company is doing to meet the commitments we require of it. Looking to the future, the Government are committed to taking decisions on the 5G supply chain based on evidence and a hard-headed assessment of the risk. We have undertaken a thorough review of that supply chain; the decisions based on that review will be announced in due course, and to this House first.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Given the concerns about Huawei's involvement in our 5G network, what more can the right hon. Gentleman say about the steps the Government are taking to secure our critical national information infrastructure?

Mr Lidington: From the Government's point of view, the security and resilience of the UK's telecoms networks are of paramount importance. We think we have robust procedures in place to manage any risks to national security today. Looking forward to the roll-out of 5G, we have three clear priorities: stronger cyber-security practices across the entire telecoms sector, greater resilience within individual telecoms networks, and—crucially—diversity in the supply chain for 5G. These are matters that go beyond any single company.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster will know that the Government are about to award a £300 million contract including requirements to host British citizens' biometric data. To protect the security and privacy of British citizens, can he guarantee that that data will not be held by foreign companies subject to foreign Government laws giving foreign Government access to British citizens' private data?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, any tendering exercise that the Government undertake has to be subject to the normal rules on open public procurement, but I know that the Home Secretary, who is responsible for the proposed database, will give the highest priority to ensuring the security of that sensitive personal data.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It has been reported that the Prime Minister has given Huawei the green light to help to build the UK's 5G network, against the advice of Ministers, our international allies and our security services, yet Huawei has itself said that it will take up to five years to secure its equipment. Why do the Government have more confidence than Huawei has in its ability to build our 5G network safely and securely?

Mr Lidington: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), the security and resilience of our telecommunications networks are of paramount importance in every decision the Government take on these matters. We have undertaken a thorough review of the entire 5G supply chain, which is designed to ensure that we can roll out 5G in a secure and resilient way. We will announce our decisions about that to this House in due course.

House of Lords Membership

4. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What steps he is taking to reduce the size of the membership of the House of Lords. [910474]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government are committed to supporting measures to reduce the size of the other place on which they can command a consensus across both Houses, such as the positive trend in retirements. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is also committed to maintaining her restrained approach to appointments.

Alan Brown: The Minister mentioned consensus, but the reality is that due to Brexit and the PM's failed leadership, this House is completely gridlocked, which gives the bishops and hereditary peers in the unelected Lords more power than ever and a greater say in Scotland's future than the Scottish Parliament itself. Does he agree with his Scottish Tory colleague, MSP Murdo Fraser, that the other place needs to be scrapped?

Kevin Foster: In the last week we sat, the Scottish National party was praising the House of peers. This week it is calling for it to be scrapped again. The focus now, with the issues facing this country, is to get on with delivering a Brexit deal that works for the whole United Kingdom, rather than spend our time building constitutional grievances, as the separatists wish to do.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment to the Front Bench and his outstanding responses so far. Notwithstanding any reservations we may have about the unelected place, is it not the case that on occasion, the standard of debate there can be a lot higher than here?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend. I am sure that over his 27 years in this House he has seen plenty of very high-standard debates. In fact, he has contributed to raising that standard on many occasions. The House of Lords plays a special part in our constitution as a revising Chamber, subject, as always, to the supremacy of this elected House.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his place. Unelected, out of touch, unresponsive—the House of Lords is not only a relic from a bygone era; it is a stain on our modern democracy. When will the Cabinet team live up to its public duty and lead a serious constitutional debate in this country to modernise our democracy and get rid of the House of Lords?

Kevin Foster: As I touched on earlier, the vast majority of people in this country—certainly in Torbay, and across the rest of the UK—would not see this House spending months on constitutional navel-gazing as the top priority at the moment. Many people have talked about reforming the House of Lords over the last century, and the Government will look at proposals that could enjoy a broad consensus, but for now, with the pressures on the legislative programme, few would understand if we decided to dedicate months to this.

Government Departments: Real Living Wage

5. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): If he will make it his policy to (a) introduce the real living wage in all Government Departments and (b) seek accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation. [910475]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I am pleased to tell the House that from 1 April, the Government increased the national living wage by almost 5% to £8.21 per hour, which gives an annual pay rise of almost £700 to full-time workers on the national living wage. That is our preferred approach to addressing low pay across both the public and private sectors.

David Linden: Of course, the national living wage is not a real living wage, and it does not apply to under-25s, so that is a load of mince, frankly. Why would the Government want to perpetuate age inequality in terms of pay? Is the Minister proud of the fact that this Government actively discriminate against young people, including his own civil servants?

Oliver Dowden: I find it extraordinary how the hon. Gentleman denigrates the national living wage. The national living wage has handed a pay rise of £3,000 to the lowest-paid workers since it was introduced, and it is rising faster than the real living wage. In respect of under-25s, we need flexibility for younger workers, to help them get into the labour market. That is a sensible compromise.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The reality is that the Government's living wage is not the living wage set by the Living Wage Commission, but putting that aside, can the Minister set out what representations he has made to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to ensure that Members of this House can become living wage employers? My understanding is that it will not let us do that.

Oliver Dowden: Relations with IPSA are a matter for the Leader of the House, not for a Cabinet Office Minister such as myself, but I have heard the hon. Gentleman's representations and I am sure the Leader of the House will have heard them as well.

Mr Speaker: What I can add, which I hope will be of some reassurance to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), is that the House of Commons is indeed an accredited living wage employer and has been for some time. I hope that that warms the cockles of the hon. Gentleman's heart.

European Parliament Elections: Candidate Intimidation

6. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to prevent the intimidation of candidates in the event that the UK participates in the upcoming European Parliament elections. [910477]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Government will work closely with the police and electoral administrators to tackle any reports or allegations of intimidation, as we do in the run-up to all elections.

Kerry McCarthy: I am very glad that the Minister is taking this seriously. There will be so many of us in this House who have seen an escalation of threats and abuse in the current political climate, and there is a real fear—when we have the likes of Nigel Farage saying that the European elections are an opportunity to put the “fear of God” into politicians—that such people run the risk of stoking up that kind of intimidation and aggressive behaviour. What can the Minister do to try to ensure that everyone conducts the European elections in a moderate, temperate, professional way?

Mr Lidington: I think there is a responsibility on politicians of all political parties—left, right and centre—to try to conduct elections in a spirit, yes, of democratic argument and debate, but also in a spirit of mutual respect for the fact that, in a pluralist democracy, we are entitled to disagree and to express our disagreement; and then to accept the election result however that turns out and to get on with people of other parties, who have an equal democratic mandate to our own.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I recently had the honour to co-host a conference on misogyny and antisemitism. May I urge the Government to do everything they can to make sure these two forms of hate crime do not prevent women from participating in elections and making their voices heard in the democratic process?

Mr Lidington: I agree wholly with what my right hon. Friend has just said. I think one of the most shocking features I have found about life in the House of Commons in the last few years is to learn, in particular from women MPs of different political parties, how they have often been singled out for the sort of misogynistic, brutal abuse that far too many have suffered.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I ask the Minister what support he can give to local authorities, and particularly to polling station staff, who in fact may be the most vulnerable during the European election campaign?

Mr Lidington: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have been consulting on creating a new electoral offence of intimidating candidates and campaigners. As far as the staff are concerned, any intimidation or abuse is *prima facie* a breach of existing criminal law, and I hope that political party representatives and presiding officers would have no hesitation in reporting such things to the police.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am very clear and I think the Government are very clear that it is the duty of all politicians of all parties to call out abuse and intimidation wherever and whenever it happens. However, in this particular instance, would it not just be better to keep our promises, and call off these farcical elections?

Mr Lidington: It would indeed be the Government's hope that, even now, we could agree and ratify the withdrawal agreement and give effect to it, which would make it possible for these elections not to take place, but the only way to stop these elections taking place is to

bring into effect the withdrawal agreement or to pass primary legislation through Parliament disapplying our international obligations.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am very worried about the fact that other candidates are already trying to intimidate candidates. Using language like “fear of God” is not a good way to go about our democracy. I was at a conference this morning at which a country, Eritrea, was trying to discuss how to build a democracy. Surely the Minister for the Cabinet Office will wish to be stronger in his language in condemning the outrageous language of other candidates using words such as “fear of God”?

Mr Lidington: I think I was very clear in my earlier comments that there is a profound responsibility on politicians, particularly political leaders, of any party to show moderation and restraint in the language they use about political opponents.

Topical Questions

T1. [910486] **Royston Smith** (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): May I start by welcoming my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) to his new ministerial role, and by wishing my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith) the best of luck as she starts her maternity leave and thanking her for the work she has championed to stop intimidation in public life?

The CyberUK 2019 cyber-security conference begins today in Glasgow. I am pleased that I will address that conference tomorrow, where I will outline our work to ensure that the UK remains a global leader in cyber-security.

Royston Smith: Ministers will know that I never miss an opportunity to talk about jobs and opportunities for my Southampton, Itchen constituents. More people are in work than ever before, but not all jobs are well paid with good opportunities. A Government relocation to Southampton would help to give my constituents more opportunities. Has the Minister considered relocation to Southampton as part of the Places for Growth programme? If not, why not?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I know what a strong champion my hon. Friend is for the city of Southampton. I have heard his representations and am very happy to extend him an invitation: officials from my Department can meet him and representatives from Southampton to see what we can do in that area.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): There are currently 2 million European citizens registered to vote in the UK, many of whom will be using their votes in the local elections next Thursday. However, in order to be eligible to vote in the European elections on 23 May, they will need to complete some paperwork. So far, fewer than 300 of those citizens have completed the paperwork, which would usually have been distributed by electoral registration officers from January onwards.

Due to the short timescale for the administration of the European elections, I have heard that many European citizens are considering taking legal action against the Government. What consideration has the Minister given to that, and what measures could the Government take to help European citizens use their vote in the European elections here in the UK?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): I appreciate that the shadow Minister's point is about the time to make a declaration rather than the registration deadline. She will appreciate that the Government's approach needs to be determined by the law and what affects it, but I am happy to look at the issue, respond to her in writing and lay a copy of that response in the House Library.

T3. [910489] **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What steps are Ministers taking to encourage the use of innovative technology for the delivery of public services?

Oliver Dowden: This is a major priority for the Cabinet Office, which is why earlier this month I announced £1.5 million in funding for 10 projects that will use location-based data to improve public services, and why I will shortly publish a strategy outlining how we will harness the power of innovative technology across the whole of Government.

T2. [910488] **Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Millions of people are not registered on the electoral roll, and they are much more likely to be from an ethnic minority, young or from a lower demographic class. Does not it say everything about this Government that at a time when we should be trying to get more people on to the register, they are doing everything they can to keep people off the register?

Kevin Foster: This is the Government who introduced online registration, which has made it much easier for people to get on the register and has resulted in among the highest numbers of registrations, so the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question is completely wrong.

T5. [910491] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, as the Institute for Government has recently pointed out, the Government have outsourced many public services precisely because the public sector was delivering them poorly, and that any plans to end outsourcing are motivated by political ideology, not by what is best for the taxpayer?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight those recent comments, which were clear that Labour's outsourcing policy risks creating major implementation problems and losing the benefits that outsourcing has brought for taxpayers, without any guarantee that services would improve. This Government will continue to make decisions on outsourcing based on the evidence, not on ideology.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: In congratulating the hon. Member for Huddersfield on the birth of his 12th grandchild—another Sheermanite in the world—I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

T4. [910490] **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will pass that message on to the new baby. Yesterday another little girl—a little Swedish girl—came to this place and reminded us how we must act dramatically to face up to climate change and the challenges of climate change. What is the Minister doing to totally re-energise every Department of State on climate change?

Mr Lidington: I think the young woman to whom the hon. Gentleman refers spoke for her generation. All of us who go into schools and colleges in our constituencies know how the issue of climate change inspires and drives political priorities among many of our young constituents. Every Department in this Government is committed to delivering the ambitious plan to reduce carbon emissions and secure our environmental objectives by the 2050 deadline. There is no difference between any Ministers about the need to get on with that.

T6. [910492] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the fact that disabled candidates in the forthcoming local elections will, thanks to this Government, be able to access dedicated disability-related funding to support the specific needs they face, without it counting towards elections expenses?

Kevin Foster: It is vital that those who stand for office are representative of our society. As a Government, we are taking action to achieve that through a £250,000 fund for disabled candidates in the forthcoming English local election in May. That will help to create a level playing field for disabled and non-disabled candidates.

T7. [910493] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline what discussions have taken place with social media outlets, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter and others, to strike the delicate balance between freedom of thought and opinion, and security and freedom from cyber-bullying?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman alludes to the fact that there is a delicate balance to strike between ensuring that people can freely express opinions and ensuring that the Government do not get involved in regulating opinions. It is about making sure that facts are accurate. That is why we are working with colleagues in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on the online harms White Paper to ensure that we can tackle those challenges and strike the right balance on freedom of speech.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I have met several innovative small businesses in Fareham recently, for example the IT business Silver Lining. Many such small and medium-size enterprises would like more opportunities to work closely with the Government. What steps are the Government taking to enable greater contracting with SMEs?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this important challenge. We have set a demanding target of 33% of all Government business going to SMEs, and our forthcoming innovation strategy will look at exactly that point—how we can make it easier for SMEs to win innovative Government work.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that we need to eradicate fake news at source, and that that includes a more ethical approach to Government advertising spend to ensure it does not go on online fake news sites?

Kevin Foster: The Government take disinformation very seriously. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is leading cross-Government work to tackle it, including through the online harms White Paper. The role of Government is to make sure that electors have the facts in public debate, not to regulate opinions people may form on them.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910494] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 24 April.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I have been asked to reply on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, who is today in Belfast attending the funeral of Lyra McKee. This was a brutal, cowardly murder of a young woman, a brilliant journalist, who represented all that is good in Northern Ireland. Those responsible for her murder have nothing to offer anyone from any community in Northern Ireland. I am sure that Members right across the House will want to join me in sending our deepest sympathies to Lyra's partner Sara, her other family members and her friends. As her family have asked, we today say that we stand with Lyra. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

The attack on three Christian churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday was a horrific and cowardly act. The House will know that a number of British citizens were killed. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister spoke to the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka to send her condolences to all affected and to offer his Government any assistance they may need. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending sympathy and condolences to all who were caught in that horrific attack, but I hope, too, that the House will perhaps reflect on the fact that that atrocity, committed on Easter Sunday, came just a couple of weeks after an equally brutal and appalling attack in Christchurch, New Zealand upon the Muslim community worshipping there. As we stand today between Easter and, next week, the beginning of the solemn month of Ramadan for our Muslim fellow citizens, I hope that this will be a time for not just Members, but all our fellow citizens of all faiths and none, to come together and stand up for the values of mutual respect, tolerance and religious diversity, which embody what is best about our country.

Jack Brereton: I echo those thoughts of sympathy and condolence.

Rejuvenating our town centres in Stoke-on-Trent is absolutely essential. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the Open Doors pilot that was recently announced for Fenton in my constituency and agree that our future high streets fund bid for Longton must also succeed?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the Open Doors pilot in his constituency. We very much welcome bids from places such as Longton town centre for this fund. My right hon. Friend the Communities Secretary is going to study all the bids carefully before making a decision later this year, but he and I know that my hon. Friend will be a doughty champion of the claims of his constituency in particular.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The Minister for the Cabinet Office and I usually enjoy trading a few jokes at these sessions, but sadly, this really is not a week for laughter. We on the Opposition side join him in standing in solidarity and shared grief with the people of Sri Lanka and all those who lost loved ones in the Easter Sunday slaughter of peaceful worshippers and innocent tourists, at least 45 of them children. Among them was the eight-year-old cousin of my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). It was an act of utter depravity and evil, which stands in sharp contrast to the words of love written by Ben Nicholson about his wife and the children that he lost.

Yesterday we also celebrated the life, but mourned the loss, of Billy McNeill, the first Briton to lift the European cup and a man who spent his life fighting against sectarian hatred. And last Thursday, we mourned the senseless murder of the brilliant young journalist Lyra McKee, whose funeral the Prime Minister is right to attend and whose death was a horrific reminder of where sectarian hatred ultimately leads. We stand with Lyra. In her name, can I ask the Minister to tell us what the Government are doing to bring her killers to justice and protect Northern Ireland from a return to terror?

Mr Lidington: I very much welcome both the tone and the words of the right hon. Lady. I also share in her tribute to Billy McNeill, who died on Monday. He made no fewer than 790 appearances for Celtic, and it is a testament to an extraordinary career that he also won 31 major trophies as a manager and a player. Our thoughts and sympathies are with his family and friends.

As the right hon. Lady will fully understand, decisions about criminal investigations in Northern Ireland are a matter for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the independent Public Prosecution Service. We very much hope as a Government that any member of the public who has information that will lead to Lyra's murderers being brought to justice will come forward. I am hopeful, given the sense of community solidarity that there has been in Londonderry/Derry and in Northern Ireland generally, that that information will be forthcoming.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I know that he speaks with huge authority and passion on this issue. Reading the statement from the so-called New IRA last week, with its talk of "attacking enemy forces" and its "sincere condolences" for Lyra's death, was a sickening throwback to the days that we

thought that we had left behind 20 years ago, from despicable individuals whose only desire is to turn back the clock and destroy the progress that has been made. Does the Minister agree that that is one of the central reasons why we must find an answer to the Northern Ireland border question rather than give these evil terrorists the divisions that they crave?

Mr Lidington: I would draw a distinction. I regard both issues that the right hon. Lady raises as important, but I do not think those murderers in Derry were motivated by any thoughts about the border or customs arrangements, important though those issues are. I agreed, however, with what she said about the utter unacceptability of references to police officers in Northern Ireland as if they were somehow a legitimate target. One of the great achievements of the peace-building process in Northern Ireland has been the very difficult and controversial reform of the police service whereby young men and women from both Unionist and nationalist communities now serve gladly together, upholding law and justice in Northern Ireland. All of us in this House should continue to send every officer in the PSNI our full support.

Emily Thornberry: I agree entirely with the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Gentleman, but can I bring him back to the issue of the border? I agree with the ends he is trying to achieve, but the fundamental problem remains the means. We all know that his own party and the Democratic Unionist party will not accept the current backstop, but the only way the Government plan to avoid that backstop is by delivering a so-called invisible border. Last week, we saw a leaked Home Office presentation stating: “No government worldwide” currently has such a system in place; that current

“realisation for a...technological solution in the UK is 2030”;

and that there

“is currently no budget for either a pilot or the programme itself.”

Is the Home Office wrong?

Mr Lidington: I will not comment on alleged leaks from Government Departments, but I can tell the House that the Government have allocated £20 million to invest in work on alternative measures that would bring benefits in terms of seamless trade to the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and that, if successful, could be applied more generally to give us smart borders on all the United Kingdom's external borders, and perhaps offer us some export opportunities for that technology as well.

Emily Thornberry: It is interesting what the Minister says, but the Home Office also says there are six problems with deploying these technological solutions: one, it is expensive and there is no budget; two, it has to operate with 28 different UK Government agencies; three, it needs to operate on both sides of the border; four, it will not be deliverable until 2030; five, the Government have a poor track record—to say the least—on big tech projects; and six, no one in the world has done anything similar. That is hardly a recipe for success.

The real answer to the Northern Ireland border question is staring the Government in the face. Twenty-eight months and two Brexit Secretaries ago, I told the Minister from this Dispatch Box that the only way to avoid a hard border was to stay in the customs union and to

align all rules and regulations. He himself said three years ago that for anyone to pretend otherwise “flies in the face of reality”.

That was the truth then, and it remains the truth today, so why will the Government not wake up to it?

Mr Lidington: I told the right hon. Lady in my previous answer that a £20 million budget had already been earmarked for this work. Whatever she may be reading in the newspapers about timetables, it is also the case that not just the United Kingdom but the European Union has committed itself to trying to get these alternative measures agreed by 2020. The European Commission has not entered into that undertaking and commitment lightly or without some thought and analysis of the chances of achieving it. The solution she identifies for a frictionless border on the island of Ireland would be delivered by the Government's withdrawal agreement, so she should be urging her right hon. and hon. Friends to vote for the Government's proposal, instead of rejecting it and therefore blocking the Brexit that her party's manifesto commits her to.

Emily Thornberry: Let's face it: we have heard it all before. The only point that the Minister did not make this time was that Britain must be able to establish her own international trade agreements. Perhaps he was listening to Nancy Pelosi last week, when she made it clear that if the UK Government disrupted the open border in Northern Ireland, we could forget all about a free trade deal with the United States.

So the Government are going to spend millions on giving Donald Trump the red-carpet, golden-carriage treatment in June. The state banquet might even be worth it, so long as he is forced to sit next to Greta Thunberg—or how about this? He could have Greta on one side and David Attenborough on the other. That would be three hours well spent. The truth is, however, that it will all be a giant waste of taxpayers' money, because the US Congress will never agree to a trade deal unless we have a solution to the Irish border issue that will actually work, and this Government simply do not have one.

Mr Lidington: Just two short years ago, the right hon. Lady said that we should

“welcome the American President...We have to work with him.”

I wonder whether something has changed about the United States Administration or something has changed about the right hon. Lady's own leadership ambitions to alter her words in this way.

I thought that both the Government and the Labour party wanted to see no tariffs, no quotas, no rules of origin checks and a seamless border on the island of Ireland, yet on three occasions the right hon. Lady and her colleagues have voted against a deal that would deliver those things to which they claim to be committed. It is about time that she put principle and the national interest ahead of party advantage.

Emily Thornberry: I think we will find that there is only one side of the House that is engaged in a leadership contest at the moment, and it is very active as we speak.

In a week like this, when we have all been shocked and saddened by horrific acts of terrorism at home and abroad, we remember that the first job of any Government is to keep our country and our citizens safe. Even before

our concerns about the economy, the main reason we need to keep an open border with Ireland is to preserve the peace and security on which millions of British and Irish citizens have come to depend, but which, in a week like this, seem to hang by a thread. If the Government are serious about putting the country first—the whole of our country—will the Minister accept that that means finally getting serious about the cross-party negotiations, and putting the option of a customs union on the table?

Mr Lidington: I appreciate that the right hon. Lady has not been in the room at times—I think she is now being described as being in the “outer inner circle” around the Labour leadership—but I can say to her that the substance and the tone of the conversations between the Government and Opposition teams have been constructive. I think that there is a genuine attempt to find a way through. However, I will not hide the fact that this is very difficult, because if it is going to work it will mean both parties making compromises and our ending up with a solution which, unlike any other proposed so far, will secure a majority in the House. So far, the House has rejected our deal; it has rejected the Opposition’s proposals; it has rejected a referendum; it has rejected revocation; it has rejected a customs union; and it has rejected common market 2.0.

This is not just a matter for the Government, or even for the Opposition Front Bench. It is a matter for every Member of the House to take our responsibilities to the country seriously, and to find a way in which to agree on an outcome that will enable us to deliver on the referendum result and take this country forward.

Q11. [910504] **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): May I also associate myself with the sentiments so eloquently expressed by Members on both sides of the House?

Far from what some would have us believe, those of us who voted to leave knew exactly what we were voting for. We were voting to control our own borders, to spend our own money, to make our own laws, and to have those laws judged by our own judges. Labour’s policy now appears to be to hold a second referendum. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that on his watch and that of the Prime Minister, there will be no second referendum? Yes or no?

Mr Lidington: The Government are very clear indeed that we do not agree with a second referendum, and we have voted against a second referendum. All of us recall telling our electors in 2016 that their decision was going to be final and would be accepted, whatever the outcome of that referendum would be. I think it would do harm to the fragile confidence in our political institutions, were that commitment to be set aside.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Scottish National party joins in saying that we are horrified by the atrocious attacks in Sri Lanka. The Minister for the Cabinet Office is right to say that all of us, from all religions and none, should be considering religious tolerance and ensuring that we champion it. Also, as her funeral commences shortly, our thoughts are with the family and friends of Lyra McKee, and we would like to make it clear that we stand with Lyra. We would also like to join the celebration of Billy McNeill’s life and work. Of course, in addition to being the manager of Celtic, he was previously the manager of Aberdeen.

Climate change is the biggest crisis facing the world today. Even the Environment Secretary has admitted that this Government have failed to do enough. Yesterday, he promised that the UK Government would take action. This Government have spent millions on nuclear power, cut support for renewable energy projects and continued to pursue fracking. Does taking action include reversing those damaging policies?

Mr Lidington: As my right hon. Friend the Environment Secretary said yesterday, there is clearly more that needs to be done. All of us who are of an age to be here would probably recognise that our generations have not done sufficient to meet this challenge, but I think the hon. Lady underestimates how much work has been done by the United Kingdom. Since 2010, we have reduced CO₂ emissions faster than any other G20 nation. Between 2010 and 2018, we reduced greenhouse gas emissions by about a quarter overall. Our renewable energy capacity has quadrupled since 2010, and the proportion of our electricity coming from low-carbon resources has increased from 19% to more than half in 2018, a record year for renewables. There is a lot more to do, but I think that that is a good record on which to base that future action.

Kirsty Blackman: I do not think that that answer recognises the scale of the challenge that we face. The Scottish Government have already brought forward a Climate Change Bill with some of the most ambitious statutory targets of any country in the world, with the aim of Scotland being carbon neutral by 2050. If we need to go further, we will. The UK Government commissioned new advice from the UK Committee on Climate Change on what the UK’s targets should be, and that advice is due next week. Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that when the advice is published next week, the UK Government will adopt the recommended targets immediately and in full?

Mr Lidington: I am going to wait to see what the advice is, and I am sure that the House could want to do that, as well as to learn from the Government directly what their decisions are going to be. Passing legislation can get us so far, but actually we need not just legislation but a change in attitudes and approach that runs right across society and industry. The UK has cut its emissions by 40% since 1990, but I am encouraged that in that same period our economy has grown by two thirds. Greater prosperity and green policies are not incompatible; they can and should be made to work together.

Q12. [910505] **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): May I associate myself with the words of those on the Front Benches?

To ensure that the British summer appetite for strawberries and Scottish raspberries is fulfilled, will my right hon. Friend encourage the Home Office to extend the seasonal agricultural workers scheme from 2,500 to 10,000 this year and to open it up to between 30,000 and 40,000 next year?

Mr Lidington: As I would have expected, my hon. Friend rightly champions both the produce of his constituency and the needs of businesses there. We have established a two-year pilot that provides for a six-month

scheme for non-EU migrants to work on UK farms. Although specifically designed to help the horticultural sector, the pilot was never designed to meet its full labour needs, so we will need to evaluate what happens in practice. However, the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be looking closely at the impact on the north-east of Scotland.

Q2. [910495] **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In 2015, when she was Home Secretary, the Prime Minister said that the Police Federation was crying wolf about the impact of police cuts. Now, teachers, specialist children and youth workers, and others are warning that Government cuts are making it harder to protect young people from knife crime. In my current constituency crime survey, many constituents are saying that cuts to services that support young people and to policing need to be reversed. Will the Minister for the Cabinet Office tell me whether he thinks that children and youth workers and my constituents are crying wolf, too?

Mr Lidington: The facts are that the Government have increased police funding by more than £970 million for the next year, and the Labour party voted against that increase when the order came before the House. However, the hon. Lady is right to say that this situation is not only about policing and new laws, but about early intervention. That is why my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has secured £220 million for early intervention projects to try to steer young people at risk of knife crime and other violent crime away from the gangs that can seduce them into that appalling way of life.

Q13. [910507] **Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Passions, including my own, are running high about the devastating effects of climate change. While this Government have made great strides, including decarbonising faster than any other country in the G20, we must do more, faster and sooner, for a sustainable future. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Prime Minister to join me in supporting a cross-party call to achieve net zero emissions ahead of our current target of 2050? Almost 200 MPs have signed the letter that was instigated by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke). Will my right hon. Friend also ask the Prime Minister to meet me and other colleagues to discuss enshrining the proposal in law, as proposed by the forthcoming ten-minute rule Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)?

Mr Lidington: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the way in which she has championed this and other environmental issues during her time in the House. I can certainly say that a Minister—I do not know whether it will be the Prime Minister—will be happy to see her and other parliamentary colleagues. I hope that she will understand that we will want to look at the advice of the independent Committee on Climate Change to understand what would be needed to achieve that net zero emissions target early and the practical steps that that would involve. However, I can assure her that we are investing more than £2.5 billion to support low-carbon

innovation in the UK over the next six years alone. Clean growth is a priority for the Government and will remain so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid that we have managed to get through only 13 questions in more than 25 minutes. We need to speed up, because I wish to accommodate the Back-Bench Members who are patiently waiting to put their inquiries.

Q3. [910496] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The proposed closure of Cumbernauld tax office will see 1,300 good-quality jobs lost to the town, with many others under threat as millions of pounds of spending disappear from the local economy. That is just one of over 150 tax office closures being overseen by the Treasury. If the Government genuinely want to build stronger towns and are concerned about towns like Cumbernauld, surely they must now put a stop to HMRC's damaging tax office closures.

Mr Lidington: I completely understand the concern, particularly among hard-working civil servants in Cumbernauld who expected to be reassigned. There is now a difference in the way in which citizens choose to interact with HMRC, with fewer people wanting or needing to access an office and more people being willing and choosing to work with the taxman online, which is clearly going to have implications. It seems to me that the priority has to be to maintain a high quality of service for businesses and individual taxpayers.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the wildfires burning across the country, including one in Moray that started near Knockando on Monday and continues despite the efforts of more than 50 firefighters. Will he join me in congratulating and praising incident commander Bruce Farquharson, all the teams involved and the other emergency services that have made this a multi-agency response? Will he also urge people to assist the fire service by keeping away from the area to allow the dedicated and committed firefighters to bring this blaze under control?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to endorse my hon. Friend's tribute to the fire and rescue service in his constituency and to support his words encouraging members of the public to co-operate fully with those services.

Q4. [910497] **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is it the Government's intention to bring forward a withdrawal agreement implementation Bill and to prorogue Parliament if they lose on Second Reading? Would it not, in fact, be far safer for the Government simply to link the Prime Minister's deal to a people's vote and to bring that forward to Parliament?

Mr Lidington: The problem with that proposal is that, so far, whenever the idea of a second referendum has been brought before the House there has been a majority against it. I do not think the right hon. Gentleman's proposal would actually deliver the outcome he seeks.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I associate myself with the remarks about Sri Lanka. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House whether he thinks it likely that we will leave the European Union by 22 May? Does he

agree with me that both the major political parties are likely to suffer at the polls if we do not? What does it say to my Leicestershire constituents about the democratic process if this House cannot get the withdrawal agreement to leave the European Union over the line?

Mr Lidington: I completely understand and share the sense of exasperation that my hon. Friend expresses. It has been made very clear from this Dispatch Box on several occasions that the consequence of the House voting to reject the withdrawal agreement and in favour of an extension is that the Government would need to make preparations, as required by law, for those European elections. The way in which we solve this problem is for Parliament to assemble a majority behind a deal, to vote for it, to get the legislation through and to give effect to our departure from the EU.

Q6. [910499] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Having experienced their average salary fall by over £2,000 a year since 2010, and expecting just a 1% pay rise this year, civil servants in the Public and Commercial Services Union are rightly being balloted for industrial action. Will the Minister tell the House when these civil servants will be free of austerity measures and receive a substantial pay rise, which is long overdue?

Mr Lidington: There has been, because of the scale of the deficit that was inherited in 2010, a need for severe restraints on public expenditure, including public sector pay. Where we are today is that there is flexibility within the overall pay ceiling, Department by Department, for Departments to negotiate arrangements with their workforces that permit higher wage increases than the ones to which the hon. Lady refers.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On Sunday, more than 40,000 people will take part in the London marathon. Many of them will be supporting the dementia revolution on behalf of Alzheimer's Research UK and the Alzheimer's Society, and some of them are sitting on the Government Benches. The UK is the world leader in dementia research. I visited the Dementia Research Institute with members of the Science and Technology Committee today. Will the Government continue to support dementia research, encourage more people—especially those in their 30s, 40s and 50s—to take part in research trials, and wish the very best of luck to everyone in the marathon on Sunday?

Mr Lidington: I join my hon. Friend in wishing success and strength to everybody taking part in the marathon on Sunday, particularly to Members from all parts of the House and, I suspect, one or two people in the Press Gallery as well. My hon. Friend makes an important point about dementia. One of the welcome changes we are seeing is that as a society we are more open about the fact that many of us will live with dementia at some stage in our lives. The Government commitment to which she referred, to dementia research and to trying to remove the stigma from dementia, will be maintained.

Mr Speaker: At the last count, I was aware of no fewer than 16 hon. and right hon. Members of the House intending to take part in the London marathon, including the Secretary of State for Wales and the hon.

Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), from whom we heard earlier, but who was too modest or self-effacing to mention her prospective involvement.

Q7. [910500] Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I do not think I could run the London marathon, Mr Speaker, so you need not include me in that.

While the McKee family today bury their daughter, who was murdered by IRA terrorists, hundreds of people in Sri Lanka are burying their loved ones who were brutally murdered because of their faith. Christians across the world are now the most persecuted religious group, with nearly 300 million living in fear of discrimination and persecution, and 4,000 being killed every year because of their faith. The Government have said that Britain is on their side. How are the Government using the UK's soft power, economic power, contacts with other Governments and aid budget to help those who are persecuted daily simply because they believe in Jesus Christ?

Mr Lidington: The aid budget and the Foreign Office diplomatic expenditure budget give, and will continue to give, priority to human rights, including the rights of Christians and people of other faiths. The right hon. Gentleman is quite correct in saying that in many countries Christians face persecution and discrimination. We work to try to improve standards of justice and civil rights in those countries, and we work with Christian and other religious communities who are under threat. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has recently commissioned a review of our work to help persecuted Christians overseas, to make sure that we are focusing the right degree of resource and effort on delivering the improvements in outcome that the right hon. Gentleman quite rightly seeks.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Current immigration requirements oblige Commonwealth servicemen and women to pay £2,389 to apply for indefinite leave to remain after four years' service, or almost £10,000 for a family of four. That considerable cost does not reflect the nation's respect for those who are prepared, in extremis, to give their lives for our country. I have therefore written a cross-party letter with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), signed by 130 Members of Parliament, to the Home Secretary to seek his support to abolish these visa fees. At a time when the UK is chair of the Commonwealth, will my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister give their support to this great non-party political cause, which is supported by the Royal British Legion?

Mr Lidington: I want to pay tribute to men and women from Commonwealth countries who serve in our armed services. That service is something that this and previous Governments have valued enormously. On the particular point that my hon. Friend makes about immigration requirements, I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will take very seriously, and look very carefully at, the representations that my hon. Friend is making.

Q8. [910501] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): When last month a football referee in Nottinghamshire had to flee a game, lock himself in the car and call the police, the Football Association responded with a six-match

ban and a £50 fine. If we bear in mind what is happening to Raheem Sterling and Danny Rose, who have called for a national forum, and the growth of racism at every level in football, is it not clear that without our help and Government help the football authorities are not capable of getting on top of the problem of racism in football? Will the Government take a lead, just as the Prime Minister did on Hillsborough, and help to convene, using their auspices, such a forum as Mr Sterling and others have requested this summer? Perhaps, Mr Speaker, you might offer this location as an appropriate venue for such a forum.

Mr Lidington: Every Member of this House will condemn without reservation the behaviour to which the hon. Gentleman referred; it should be regarded as completely beyond the bounds of acceptability in our society. My hon. Friend the Sport Minister will want to sit down with the hon. Gentleman and any other colleagues in the House who make this issue a priority, to discuss what more might be done.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Yesterday, Jane Golding, who chairs British in Europe, which represents more than 1.3 million British nationals in the EU27, reminded me that Michel Barnier's letter in response to the House's requirement that we carve out the citizens' rights element of the withdrawal agreement is almost one month old. Given the absence of the passage of a withdrawal agreement, will my right hon. Friend inform the House of what actions the Government have taken since they received Michel Barnier's letter?

Mr Lidington: As I recall, my hon. Friend was successful in seeking that the Government should make representations to the European Commission to ask it to carve the citizens' rights elements out of the overall withdrawal agreement. There are legal problems with that, in that the withdrawal agreement stands together as a package, and as a package has been submitted to the European Parliament, having been formally and legally approved by the European Council. To separate elements of the agreement might therefore mean having to go through those European procedures again, assuming the political willingness to do so were there. I will ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to speak urgently to my hon. Friend to update him on where we are on the issue.

Q9. [910502] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is complacent to claim that we are on target to meet our climate change obligations when emissions from air freight and the shipping of imports and exports are excluded from the figures. Will the Government be honest about the scale of the challenge of climate change? We need to invest fully in renewable energy, drop the fascination with fracking and declare a climate change emergency, because that is the reality of what we face.

Mr Lidington: The rules on emissions from shipping are not unique to the United Kingdom: the standards of measurement are global. As I said in earlier exchanges, the Government are the first to say that more needs to be done, but the hon. Gentleman does us an injustice in not acknowledging that we have a better track record on this issue than any other member of the G7. He asked

about investment: our annual support for renewables will be more than £10 billion by 2021. We have opened the world's largest offshore wind farm, which is capable of powering 600,000 homes, and the world's first ever floating offshore wind farm. Some 99% of the solar power we have in the UK has been deployed since 2010. That is a good track record.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do the Government accept that the telecommunications firm Huawei is intimately linked with the Chinese communist Government and their deeply hostile intelligence services?

Mr Lidington: Legally speaking, Huawei is a private firm, not a Government-owned company, but my right hon. Friend takes us to the question about the proposed roll-out of 5G networks. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has commissioned a wide-ranging and thorough review of this matter. We are giving priority to stronger cyber-security practice across the entire telecommunications sector, greater resilience in telecommunications networks and, critically, diversity in the entire 5G supply chain, because this question goes beyond any single company. When we have taken decisions about that review, we will announce them to the House in the proper way.

Mr Speaker: Knowing the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) as I do, I think the Minister will have to recognise that he will probably hear from him on this matter a few hundred more times in the coming weeks.

Q10. [910503] **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Government continue to chronically underfund the Welsh railway network with planned spending running at 6% despite its having 11% of the network. Will the Minister set out when the Government will start investing in Welsh railway infrastructure and give Welsh commuters the investment that they deserve?

Mr Lidington: We are investing record amounts in Wales's railway infrastructure. Network Rail investment in the Wales route for control period 6, which takes us up to 2024, will be more than £1.5 billion. It will deliver improved journeys for passengers in Wales on the most advanced new trains. In south Wales, passengers and commuters are already experiencing real improvements thanks to the new Intercity express trains, each of which have 130 extra seats compared with the typical high-speed train. I really wish that the hon. Gentleman had paid tribute to that achievement, rather than carping.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I will, if I may, add a few words of tribute of my own to Billy McNeill, who was a childhood hero of mine and a truly legendary Celt. His family have described his brave struggle with dementia—a subject reminiscent of the question that was asked earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). My own mother passed away earlier this year owing to the effects of dementia. Scottish universities are doing world-leading research into the prevention of dementia and they currently receive about £100 million of funding each year from the European Union. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that funding will be maintained and that this research will be protected as we leave the European Union?

Mr Lidington: If we get the implementation period that is envisaged by the withdrawal agreement then those funding arrangements will continue until the end of that period. At that point, there will need to be decisions by Government as a whole about their spending priorities, including on medical research, but, as I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), the Government's commitment to dementia research and to ending the stigma of dementia is something that will continue.

Q14. [910508] Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): Average wages have been stagnating for more than a decade, in-work poverty is rising faster than employment, and we are hurtling towards a climate disaster. What a mess, Mr Speaker! In Midlothian, enterprising renewable firms and organisations are doing sector-leading work and providing good jobs, but they tell me that they are not getting enough support from the Government. The Minister has boasted about renewables in this session, but will he recognise that that is not enough and say what more he and the Government will do to support leading work on renewables in my constituency?

Mr Lidington: What we are seeing in this country is not only the £10 billion that I spoke about in the earlier exchange, but enterprising innovative companies—large and small—seizing the opportunities of developing green technology and renewable energy technology in a way that will take advantage not just of the change in the domestic market, but of that growing export market globally as well. Through their industrial strategy, the Government will continue to work for green growth, and I hope very much that businesses in Midlothian and elsewhere in the UK will benefit from that.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): At the most recent indicative votes, the Opposition did move one of their key red lines and supported a proposal that did not specify a permanent customs union. In fact, they supported customs arrangements—a temporary customs union followed by alternative arrangements. Now that the Government and Opposition are virtually on the same page, is it not time to put party politics to one side and agree a deal in the national interest?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes an important point. As we look to the future relationship with the European Union, we are looking at the customs

arrangement that would be in place as part of that future relationship. We have already indicated—as reflected in the existing text of the political declaration—that we want to retain the benefits of a customs union, with no tariffs, no quotas and no rules of origin checks. We remain focused on agreeing an approach that delivers on the result of the referendum, which was for the UK to leave. I hope that it would be possible to bring Members from all parties of the House together in support of a customs arrangement as part of a wider approach to our future relationship with the European Union that enables us to get on with this task in the way in which the British people expect.

Mr Speaker: Finally, patience rewarded—Mr Nigel Dodds.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Let me go back to the subject that the Minister started this session with. In a few minutes, the funeral of Lyra McKee will begin in Belfast. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition are both there, and rightly so. We extend our deepest sympathies to Lyra's partner Sara, and to her family and friends, at this terrible time. The message across Northern Ireland is that violence is not acceptable and will never succeed; it has never been acceptable and it never will be. Does the Minister agree that it was an utterly repulsive statement from those who carried out this terrible atrocity that, somehow, the murder of police officers is totally legitimate and it was just an accident that Lyra was killed? In standing with Lyra today, we stand with everyone—journalists, police officers and all who serve the community in Northern Ireland. An attack on any one of them is an attack on us all.

Mr Lidington: I agree with every word that the right hon. Gentleman just said. I thought that the finest riposte to those sickening claims by the terrorists was that the leaders of both the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin came together, there in the Creggan estate in Derry, and put aside the real differences between them to reject the path towards violence and terror—the joint statement by all party leaders in Northern Ireland rejecting terrorism. The visible expressions of grief and anger towards the terrorists by the communities both of nationalists and of Unionists in the city of Derry/Londonderry has been a visible riposte—but also the most compelling and moving one—to the evil claims of those behind that terrorist act. Those political leaders and communities in Derry spoke for the reality and for the heart of the people of Northern Ireland.

Saudi Arabia: Mass Executions

12.53 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office if he will make a statement on what representations he has made to the Saudi Government with respect to the mass execution of 37 people yesterday.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): We are very concerned by the executions of 37 men in Saudi Arabia, and the Foreign Office is working to establish the full facts. The Foreign Secretary will be raising this matter with the Saudi authorities at the earliest opportunity. The UK Government oppose the death penalty in all circumstances and in every country, including in Saudi Arabia. We regularly raise human rights concerns, including the use of the death penalty, at the highest levels with the Saudi Arabian authorities.

Sir Vince Cable: May I ask the Minister specifically what representations were made in respect of the 12 condemned men I referred to the Prime Minister's attention on 3 December, including Abbas al-Hassan, who was executed yesterday?

Does the Minister recall his predecessor's statement on 7 March 2018 that the Foreign Office was

"concerned with those cases where minors might have been indicted"—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 319.]

but that he had received assurances on that matter? Is the Minister now aware of the fact that three of the executed people, and possibly more, were indeed juveniles, and that in most of these cases—again, in flagrant disregard for international law—most appear to have been tortured prior to the extraction of confessions? Does he acknowledge that there have been around 100 executions so far this year and that, according to the campaigning group Reprieve, Saudi Arabia is on track to execute 300 people by the end of this year? Will the Minister agree to meet me and representatives of Reprieve to go through the list of condemned people and see how representations could most effectively be made?

Finally, does he accept that Britain's moral position on this issue is somewhat compromised by the continued supply of arms, fuelling atrocities in the civil war in Yemen, and that we are in urgent need of a reappraisal of our relationship with Saudi Arabia, given that the continued medieval barbarism of the regime does not constitute the basis for a friendly alliance, and indeed makes it an enemy of our values and our human rights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this situation does raise the gravest imaginable concerns. Executing 37 people is a deeply backwards step, which we deplore. In response to the specific question about representations that have been made in the past, I can confirm that British embassy representatives in Riyadh did make representations regarding specific individuals last November.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out that one of the grave concerns about these executions is that they would appear to include minors, or those who were minors at the time that the charges were made. This is of course totally unacceptable and we deplore it. I can

advise the House that in just the last few minutes, the European Union—and we have put our name fully to this—has issued a very strong statement of condemnation through the European External Action Service, pointing out that these executions are a regressive step and specifically raising concerns that some of the 37 people executed were minors.

I fully appreciate what the right hon. Gentleman is saying regarding our arms exports. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia faces a number of threats; the issue of arms is not just about using arms in Yemen. We ensure that any arms exports fully comply with the consolidated criteria that govern any such sales.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I share the sentiments expressed by my right hon. Friend at the Dispatch Box. The security and stability of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia matters a great deal in the region, and is indeed the basis of our relationship. Notwithstanding our shared concerns with regards to terror, will my right hon. Friend confirm that we do everything we can to use our influence to impress upon the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that that relationship carries with it obligations? When he and the House express themselves in such strong terms, there is usually a very good reason why those concerns are being expressed, and they should be listened to.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for what he has said. He speaks with the utmost authority in this House and was an excellent Minister for the Middle East; I have to say that, at a moment like this, I rather wish that he still was. I can say in all honesty that, despite always being polite, he never held back from telling his counterparts in Saudi Arabia where he thought they were making mistakes and where he thought their record on human rights fell short. It is by having access of that sort and having trusted Ministers on our side that we can best get that message over—and I hope, over time, make a difference.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): As we have heard, yesterday saw the largest mass execution in Saudi Arabia since January 2016, in which 37 people were killed. According to the official Saudi press agency, the men were executed:

"for adopting terrorist and extremist thinking and for forming terrorist cells to corrupt and destabilise security".

They were arrested after four Islamic State gunmen attacked a Saudi security compound in Riyadh, but the Saudi authorities have still not made clear whether those arrested were linked to the attacks.

Publicly pinning one of the headless bodies to a pole as a warning is not only disturbingly barbaric and medieval in nature, but an abhorrent violation of human rights. According to the families of those executed, there was no prior notice that the executions would be carried out. That is a blatant flouting of international standards set out by even the most brutal of regimes that still use the death penalty. We know that some, if not all, of those executed were convicted in Saudi Arabia's Specialised Criminal Court, which has been widely condemned by human rights groups as secretive, and which has in the past been used to try human rights activists, whom the state often wrongly regards as terrorists.

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

We also know that at least three of those executed were juveniles—a clear violation of international law, which the Saudi regime appears to care very little about. Abdulkarim al-Hawaj was charged with participating in demonstrations, incitement via social media and preparing banners with anti-state slogans. Reports from human rights watchdogs in the country claim that he was beaten and the so-called confessions extracted from him through various means of torture. Muftaba al-Sweikat was a student about to begin his studies at Western Michigan University when he was arrested at King Fahd airport, beaten and so-called confessions extracted through torture. Salman Qureish was just 18 when he was executed, but he was convicted of crimes that allegedly took place when he was still a child. The UN has condemned his sentencing and the use of the death penalty against him after he was denied basic legal rights, such as access to a lawyer.

Saudi Arabia has executed more than 100 people already this year. If it continues, the number of executions this year alone will reach over 300. Human rights group Reprieve says that five of the prisoners it supported were executed yesterday. Many were forced to stand in stress positions for hours and deprived of sleep until a confession was extracted.

These executions have caused a breakdown in Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran and have the potential to destabilise the region further, so what discussions has the Minister had with his Saudi counterpart since the executions took place? Will the Government condemn the use of the death penalty in Saudi Arabia today? Will the Government call for an immediate end to executions in Saudi Arabia? Finally, what plans do the Government have to tackle the use of violence against human rights activists in Saudi Arabia?

Mr Speaker: I yield to none in my affection and admiration for the hon. Gentleman, but he is fortunate that I am in a generous mood. I note in passing that he was due to speak for two minutes, spoke for a little over three, and the first of his four questions was posed after three minutes and one second. It was a volley of unsurpassable eloquence, but it was a tad too long.

Sir Alan Duncan: I take that as you instructing me to be suitably short, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman and I share in common a characteristic of being short, and we have done so for some decades, as he knows.

Sir Alan Duncan: I will happily confirm that you always win, but I will not say in which direction I am pointing, Mr Speaker.

I do not think anyone in this House would disagree with what the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) has said. All Members want to defend human rights, and we abhor executions of this sort. We really do genuinely disapprove in the strongest possible terms of what has happened, particularly when it is reported that one of those executed was displayed on a cross—something that anyone in this House just a few days after Easter will find more repulsive than anything we could have pictured.

We have to be sure of our facts, however. We need to find out directly what precisely were the supposed crimes and what was the due process used. Although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can legitimately use its law to bear down on genuine extremist threats, its Government must appreciate that there will be growing international pressure on them to accept that the sort of action we are discussing is utterly unacceptable in the modern world. It does them no credit and it does not support the basis of law that any proper country should be working on.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I have worked with the hon. Members for Stockton South (Dr Williams) and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on a detention review panel of the female human rights activists in Saudi Arabia. Does my right hon. Friend accept that these executions and the accelerating pace of executions in Saudi Arabia cannot be seen in isolation from the wider criminal justice policy—if that is what one should call it—that relates to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and the detention of civil society activists in Saudi Arabia? If Saudi Arabian civil society space is closed down as it has been, the security and stability of the country, which is after all our ally, will be the victim.

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend makes a serious point: any country needs to realise that using such methods will eventually backfire. Although I think there are greater arguments for pointing out how unacceptable such methods are, rulers are wise to be mindful of such dangers.

I did not answer the question put by the hon. Member for Leeds North East about human rights defenders. Yes, we will raise the issue of freedom and protection for those who defend human rights. It is not acceptable to attack non-governmental organisations when what they are doing is trying to defend justice.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) for securing this urgent question.

We are here to discuss yet more appalling human rights violations. There is huge concern about this latest mass execution. Not only is it reported that a number of those executed were from the Shi'a minority, but, critically, and as has been pointed out, a number of those put to death were minors at the time of the alleged crimes.

We have been here rather frequently to discuss human rights violations, what is happening in Yemen, the murder of Mr Khashoggi, and so on. The issues are raised, and when we talk about arms sales and our relations with Saudi Arabia we are told that we have influence, but it is difficult to see that influence at the moment. Does the Minister agree that we must reassess the relationship with Saudi Arabia? Also, instead of us coming back time after time to discuss more issues of concern, will the right hon. Gentleman commit to returning to the House to tell us what has been done about that reassessment?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will be discussing this with the Foreign Secretary, and he will be calling his counterpart, the relatively new Foreign Minister in Saudi Arabia. The hon. Gentleman makes a serious point that we should all take on board: the broader picture gives growing cause for concern. We can look at those who have been executed and their number—Shi'a, minors

and those whose crimes we do not know, as well as the Khashoggi incident—and I am sure that we will be robust in our embassy and Minister-to-Minister representations. It is important that the regime in Saudi Arabia appreciates that the voice of world opinion can only get louder in its condemnation.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): The King of Saudi Arabia is reported as being interested in ensuring that there is prison reform in his kingdom. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that prison conditions will be on the agenda next time he raises human rights with the Saudis?

Sir Alan Duncan: This is an important agenda. When I was a Minister at the Department for International Development, I always wanted prison visiting and access to be a condition of any aid that we gave to a country, although I did not exactly succeed in my objective. My hon. Friend illustrates the important point that when people are hidden and no one can get to them, we do not know what is going on. The ability for decent people to inspect prisons and visit prisoners, as is the case in this country, is a very important aspect of any judicial system and the human rights that ought to go alongside it.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Saudi Arabia is now one of the world's top executioners, behind only China and Iran. Amnesty International called the recent executions "a chilling demonstration of the Saudi Arabian authorities' callous disregard for human life. It is also yet another gruesome indication of how the death penalty is being used as a political tool to crush dissent from within the country's Shi'a minority."

These Shi'a men apparently were convicted after sham trials that involved torture. We must condemn this in the strongest possible terms and take some kind of action. Words are easy, but the UK must give a direct indication that we will not put up with this kind of thing.

Sir Alan Duncan: No one can question the right hon. Lady's track record on defending human rights. We hear loudly what she says. One of the questions we need to ask the Saudi Government is what on earth they think this will achieve. The practical benefit seems entirely negative, and I hope that the rational argument that the death penalty achieves nothing in the modern world will eventually sink in.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Minister feel, as I do, that the feebleness of the response to the Khashoggi murder and the butchering of his body has in some way encouraged the Saudi authorities to think they can get away with anything, no matter how brutal and borderline insane?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not quite agree with my right hon. Friend. The international reaction was pretty robust, and a collective voice condemned it, led by Turkey, where it happened. I would like to think that that incident had a dividend and it got through to people that it was unacceptable, and they were taken aback by the fact that the murder of one person counted for so much elsewhere in the world. I hope it will never be repeated.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Three more juveniles who were arrested after the Arab spring for peaceful protest—Dawood al-Marhoon, Ali al-Nimr

and Abdullah Hasan al-Zaher—have gone through the same process and are on death row awaiting execution by beheading, which could happen at any time with no notice. Will the Government make specific representations for those three? Otherwise, we will see more executions as the year progresses.

Sir Alan Duncan: These 37 executions will spur us to take a deep interest in not only the general concept and principle of the death penalty but individual cases. Given the robustness of the statement just issued by the European Union, I am confident that we will not be alone in making our opinions clear.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can we have a measure of repentance about the enthusiasm with which we sponsored Saudi Arabia for the United Nations Human Rights Council?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am always happy to be repentant to my right hon. Friend. I am not familiar with the exact details of what he refers to, but I maintain the position that we will make our views on these issues clear in a very robust way to the Saudi Government.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I remind the House that I chair the all-party parliamentary British-Qatar group and am an officer of the all-party group on Kuwait, so I hope the Minister will accept that he does not need to persuade me of the importance of creating good relations with our friends in the Gulf. But when I read about the use of not only capital punishment but torture to obtain confessions, on the basis of which the executions were carried out—including the torture of Munir al-Adam, who was beaten so badly that he lost his hearing in one ear—I find myself asking, why do the Government of my country want to regard these people as our friends? Surely this is the time for a fundamental reappraisal of our relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Sir Alan Duncan: We unreservedly condemn torture in all circumstances. I understand what the right hon. Gentleman is asking for. We have to look at the broader picture of the entire Gulf and the dangers around it. That is always taken into consideration when looking at who we work with across the world.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I know how much my right hon. Friend cares and how hard he works on these matters of human rights. The European Union has also condemned what is happening. Can we ensure that this is not just the ritual condemnation that happens immediately after an event and then is forgotten, but that at every opportunity in his dialogue with Saudi counterparts, he stresses the value that this country and our European partners place on freedom, human rights, religious freedom and all those areas that would be of great benefit to Saudi Arabia if it were to embrace them?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is right. It is no good just having a day's anger after an event such as this. It has to be persistent and consistent, and the condemnation of executions of this sort and any abuse of human rights has to be built into our policy and actions at all time.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Human rights abuses, executions, airstrikes in Yemen killing 100 in March alone, including 19 children—if the Saudis continue to fail to listen to the Minister's pleading, why does he extend to them the veneer of respectability?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady mentions Yemen. I have spent many decades taking an interest in Yemen. I hope we will now see some progress towards a political settlement. We have to give our full support to Martin Griffiths, our UN representative. Part of the message we have to send to the Saudi Government is that bombings in Yemen do not achieve any of the objectives they have set out to achieve, and we need a political settlement as a matter of urgency.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that this country does not pursue trade at the expense of human rights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can give that assurance. We obviously want to defend human rights everywhere, and we want to maximise our trade, but we will not pursue a trade opportunity at the expense of human rights.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is difficult to fathom the logic of such senseless barbarism in Saudi Arabia's policies, and this has wider implications, particularly in relation to Iran and the geopolitical stability of the middle east. At what point will this country's commercial and geopolitical interests come second to the need to demonstrate moral courage and real economic consequences of Saudi Arabia's continued behaviour?

Sir Alan Duncan: We value our trade with Saudi Arabia, as we do with all partners in the Gulf, but we have to ensure that such commercial activity goes hand in hand with the robust political messages that we all send in this House today.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) said, the vast majority of those executed yesterday were Shi'a Muslims. To what degree do the British Government consider that the Saudi regime is using the death penalty as a means of quashing dissent among a persecuted religious minority within its borders?

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not think that this is the moment for me to give an extended thesis on such matters, but I understand the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. In many parts of the middle east, the Sunni-Shi'a conflict is very intensive and creates enormous tension, difficulty and strife. I very much hope that in the years ahead, we will see the temperature settle and good relations between Sunni and Shi'a communities everywhere.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What more could the Government do through the embassy in Saudi Arabia to work with civil society, women's groups in particular and human rights defenders to ensure that human rights are upheld in the kingdom?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise this point. As a Government, we tend to attend internationally important trials in all countries, where

of course it is permitted by the host Government. We have been denied access to trials in certain circumstances in Saudi Arabia. I think that defending human rights activists and NGOs is very important. To that end, our embassy is very active, and some of its engagement with the Government may not be popular with them, but that is what our embassies should be doing. They are defending justice, decency and human rights, and that is what our foreign policy is designed to do.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): These men could not have been convicted in any court worthy of the name, because a conviction that relies on evidence obtained through torture is no conviction. In the eyes of any law, these men were innocent: they were not executed; they were murdered for dissenting from the policies of the dictatorship that runs the country.

The Minister has listed a lot of things the Government have done previously that have made no difference. If anything, Saudi Arabia is going in the wrong direction. He has ruled out a fundamental rethink of our relationship with Saudi Arabia, and he has ruled out a fundamental rethink of our multibillion-pound arms trade with Saudi Arabia. Will the Minister tell us what else is left that the Government have not already tried, and which has failed to persuade these people that the regime does not belong in the 21st century?

Sir Alan Duncan: First, we do have to be certain about establishing the facts in these cases. I know that a lot of suggestions have been made about many things that may have happened with the 37, but before we speak with the authority of Government, we do very much feel obliged to establish all the facts first and to engage with the Saudi Government in doing so. On what can be done, I again go back to the point about growing international pressure. I hope that, by acting in concert with other countries, we can, perhaps on the back of these executions, make a difference to future policy and behaviour in the kingdom.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): This is an ally whose behaviour is as bad, if not worse, than most of the regimes around the globe that we would regard as hostile. I guess that ordinary constituents listening to this and reacting to the barbarism will want to know whether there is a bottom line. Is there a point at which this becomes a friendship not worth having?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that there is a moral dilemma here. Moral dilemmas are never a choice between black and white; they are a choice between different shades of grey, and there is deep murkiness here that we do not like. I hear exactly what the hon. Gentleman says, and we will continue to make the points and keep up the pressure I have been describing today.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Amnesty International has said that there was a welcome reduction last year in the number of executions worldwide, but clearly what Saudi Arabia is doing is going in the opposite direction. The worst offenders are China with more than 1,000, Iran with several hundred, and then Saudi, Vietnam and Iraq. What steps can we take internationally, in the UN and elsewhere, to get back to the good trend of a reduction in the number of executions?

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the trend has been thrown into reverse gear. That is what the EU statement today says specifically in respect of Saudi Arabia. We do not just want the trajectory to be going downwards; we want it to be down at zero. That is our ambition and I hope, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, that the UN can play its part in making a resounding noise of condemnation in relation to those who use the death penalty in any circumstances.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): While it is always a pleasure to see the Minister at the Dispatch Box, it really is nonsense that the Prime Minister has not been able to replace the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) in such a key role for the Government at this time.

These reports are highly distressing. Does the Minister agree, however, that the UK will undermine its efforts to persuade our security allies such as Saudi Arabia to reform this draconian justice system if it does not itself apply the fundamental values of British liberty and fair due process to its own citizens, even those—perhaps particularly those—who have been radicalised in the UK and have gone abroad to commit terrorist acts in other countries? Should they not be brought back here to be tried, rather than be subjected to a judicial process way below the standards we would accept here in the UK?

Sir Alan Duncan: I accept that we are one Minister down in the Foreign Office at the moment, and that may well be because my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) is in fact irreplaceable.

On due process, the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that this is straying slightly from the focus of this urgent question, but when someone is subject to the law and the process of the courts in the UK, I think we can be proud of our judicial system and the fairness it contains.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his very helpful responses. The Minister will know that Saudi Arabia has a death penalty in law for those who convert from Islam to Christianity. Freedom of religious belief has been very much in the minds of all of us in this House—including the Minister, I know—and of those outside this House as well. The death penalty for someone pursuing their religious belief and conviction is unbelievable in this day and age, especially in the light of the murderous intent of those against Christians in Sri Lanka. What discussions has the Minister had with the Saudi Arabian Government about removing the death penalty for changing religion?

Sir Alan Duncan: Our objective is for the Saudi Arabian Government to remove the death penalty for absolutely everything. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made very clear statements in defence of religious freedom everywhere, particularly in defence of Christians, who are increasingly being persecuted across the world. As the hon. Gentleman rightly points out, the atrocities in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday were, to a large extent, against Christians who were worshipping on Easter Day. I hope that the voice of the Foreign Office and the application of our foreign policy will be to defend human rights, religious freedom and—as my right hon. Friend has said as well, and importantly—media freedom.

Speaker's Statement

1.27 pm

Mr Speaker: I have received a communication this afternoon from Southwark Crown court informing me that Chris Davies, the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, has been convicted of providing false or misleading information for a parliamentary allowances claim. Since Mr Davies pleaded guilty, there can be no appeal against conviction. This notification accordingly triggers the provisions of the Recall of MPs Act 2015, and I will accordingly be writing to the relevant petition officer to inform that person that Chris Davies is therefore subject to a recall petition process. It will be for that officer to make the arrangements for the petition.

Gambling (Industry Levy Review and Protections for Vulnerable People)

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

1.28 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a review of the case for a levy on the gross revenues of gambling firms and to require that review to make recommendations on the possible uses of revenue from such a levy in connection with research on gambling addiction, protections for children and other vulnerable people at risk of being harmed by gambling, and gambling addiction clinics; and for connected purposes.

There is very little, if anything, more important for MPs to do than supporting and protecting the most vulnerable in our nation. Typically, that is reflected in the huge amount of our public spending rightly spent on welfare and pensions, in using science and technology for remarkable solutions to health issues, including mental health issues, and in much greater awareness of and legislation against hatred and prejudices of all kinds. This Bill, however, aims to help with a different sort of vulnerability—that resulting from the increasing amount of addiction to gambling, which, in extreme circumstances, has led, and does lead, to suicide. There is nothing more sad than meeting a constituent, or non-constituent, who has lost a child to suicide as a result of the pressures of gambling debts. Even one life destroyed by gambling is too many. The depressing thing is that we simply do not know how many people have committed suicide as a result of gambling.

The only statistics available suggest that last year, between 250 and 650 gamblers committed suicide. I know of at least one case where the family ensured that gambling was not the reason given at the inquest. For how many more is that true? What is the real figure of suicide gamblers? Whether it is 250 or 650, it surely tells us forcefully that the assumptions in the Gambling Act 2005 about gambling being harmless for the vast majority of people need to be challenged; that existing protections are not working as they should; and that we—Government, Parliament, the regulator, the gambling sector, charities, us as a society—need to do a lot more to protect those vulnerable to gambling addiction.

This is urgent, because the problem is getting worse. More than 55,000 young people under the age of 14 are already addicted—a figure up sharply on even two years ago and rising fast. That is alongside 430,000 adults with a serious gambling issue—what we would in normal English call addicts—and 2 million at risk. That, above all, is why I seek leave today to bring in a Bill to ask the Government to review the case for a levy. I cannot in a ten-minute rule Bill ask directly for a specific levy, although as Simon and Garfunkel once put it, if I could, I surely would.

The main aim of such a levy would be to research what causes gambling addiction. How does it start? Who is it most likely to impact? Who is most vulnerable? How can we spot the signs, and what can we do to prevent it? Although prevention is always better than cure, what more can we do through gambling clinics and other means to help those already addicted? What

can we learn from those who have almost become addicted and pulled back successfully, on their own or with help?

This needs immediate and deep investment in research to analyse the extent of gambling addiction, including looking at all aspects of marketing and advertising by gambling companies. The chair of the regulator, the Gambling Commission, has said that

“problem gambling has a real cost to the economy and to the individuals and families affected by it, although the scale of the adverse impact is currently poorly understood.”

That is a huge understatement. The damage done not just to individual lives but to families and friends, with strains on relationships, marriages, jobs and mental health, is already considerable and getting worse.

Let me say something about a potential levy on gambling company gross profits. The industry’s gross profits of £14 billion, tax receipts of £3 billion, 100,000 employees and £200 million of advertising revenues give an idea of the volume of gambling. Although the regulator requires a voluntary contribution, the current amount raised—£9 million a year—is tiny compared with the size of the industry. A reasonable levy could generate significant revenue to fund new independent research to recommend much greater protection for children and other vulnerable people at risk, including university students, often lonely and mentally unconfident in new surroundings. Such a levy could also fund jointly commissioned gambling clinics, like the new one in London and the one coming soon in Leeds. At the moment, just 2% of those who need help get it, and that cannot be right. The Gordon Moody Association rehabilitation centres have long waiting lists; a levy could bring them down and provide help as soon as possible. In short, addiction is a public health issue, but gambling addiction involves every aspect of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. A levy on the gambling sector to fund the help needed has to be right.

Research could also inform my belief that more action is needed to protect the young from gambling advertising. That means eliminating gambling advertising on live sports programmes. More than 90 minutes of betting adverts were shown during the football World cup, and no live sport on non-BBC channels is free of gambling advertising. Three big companies have already agreed in principle to do that, and I believe it should be implemented as soon as possible, but we should go further and the Gambling Commission should ban gambling advertising during live sport altogether.

The levy could also be used to build on much stronger self-exclusion, with real commitments from banks. How can gamblers access credit that they clearly cannot afford, racking up massive debts, without gambling companies, banks or the regulator being able to prevent it? Why cannot banks identify the issue earlier, and how easy is it for gamblers to completely self-exclude, to stop getting emails or texts highlighting the latest improbable deal? There is currently no easy way for gamblers to put effective blocks on debit card transactions. That is why I fully endorse the Gambling Commission’s discussions with banks about how to improve protection for problem gamblers, and I urge both to move fast on taking real action. I hope that research would echo that.

There has been progress on the software used by some gambling companies to allow for effective self-exclusion, but I have also been shown how easy it is to

get around that; some gamblers will go to great lengths to get around self-exclusion blockages. I have seen evidence of how difficult it can be to contact a human in the gambling companies, and I have seen how once a company has an individual's contact details it will pump out attractive, if sometimes misleading, special offers, day and night. The review could look at how self-exclusion can become an absolute guaranteed 100% opt-out—no ifs, no buts.

I presume such a levy would go to the Gambling Commission, which could also recommend how we can best use technology to protect more people, not just to expand the amount of gambling. Using software such as gamban to block gambling sites can help with self-exclusion, and it should surely be mandatory for all gambling companies to have such systems. Other tools could be developed to help protect the young, such as facial recognition to block under-age gambling more effectively.

This ten-minute rule Bill cannot solve all the problems thrown up by the opening up of the gambling sector through the 2005 Act, nor is it remotely an attempt to ban all gambling. Ultimately, however, it was Parliament that opened the door to online gambling, and with it has come a growing number of citizens vulnerable to gambling addiction. It is no good imagining that the regulator can manage all of the problems alone. We here have a special responsibility, and I believe that a review of the mandatory levy, to fund vital research, protection strategies, changes to policies on credit and access to money that have led in some cases to tragic deaths, and new policies, clinics and rehabilitation centres to help cure those addicted, would make a real difference.

As I said at the beginning, we—society—need to consider our approach to gambling. Will it be the tobacco of this generation—something once widely advertised, then restricted and finally banned from advertising altogether? Will those damaged or even killed by gambling be our legacy, or is this our chance to get the right balance between funding sport, using technology and having the right protections to prevent tragedy? I believe that this Bill, which would require a review of a mandatory levy, would, were the Government to go ahead with it, result in recommendations across different aspects of gambling and protection and would be a major step forward, for we need action now.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Richard Graham, Mr Iain Duncan Smith, Sir Peter Bottomley, Simon Hart, Andrew Selous, Alex Burghart, Tom Watson, Carolyn Harris, Graham P. Jones, Christine Jardine, Ronnie Cowan and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Richard Graham accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 May, and to be presented (Bill 380).

Opposition Day

[UNALLOTTED DAY]

Local Government and Social Care Funding

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I must inform the House that Mr Speaker has not selected the amendment.

1.40 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that despite the Prime Minister announcing that austerity is over, local authorities' spending power per household is on course to fall by an average of 23 per cent by 2020, and that nine of the 10 most deprived council areas in this country have seen reductions that are almost three times the average of any other council under this Government; recognises that this has resulted in social care budgets in England losing £7 billion; further notes that at the last General Election Labour committed to a fully costed plan to invest an additional £8 billion in social care over this Parliament; and calls on the Government to ensure that local authorities and social care are properly and sustainably funded.

If I may, I seek the indulgence of the House to briefly place on record, as shadow Communities Secretary, my utter shock and revulsion at the recent terrorist atrocities, both in Northern Ireland and in Sri Lanka, over the Easter break. We send our condolences to the families affected and to their communities. Coming so soon after the terrible events in Christchurch, New Zealand, just before Easter, they serve as a bleak reminder of how fragile our human rights and freedoms are, and how we must redouble our efforts in this place and outside to hold our communities together.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The whole House will be grateful for the way the hon. Gentleman has introduced the debate and for those sentiments. Does he agree that people do such things for publicity and public reaction, and that we should take care to ensure that our publicity and our public reaction confronts and confounds their aims, so that what they do will be in vain, even though it has taken a terrible toll on those directly affected?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We should stand firm against terrorist atrocities wherever they are perpetrated. We should stand strong as a community, both in the United Kingdom and in the global community, against such acts of terror. We should call them out wherever they take place.

I welcome the opportunity to raise the important matter of local government funding in an Opposition day debate, especially considering how scarce the opportunities are for the Opposition to raise matters in such debates. I pay tribute to the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), whose dogged pursuit of that issue has allowed us to debate this important matter today.

In this place our discussion has been dominated by Brexit, but across the country our local councils, and the local services people rely on, are straining at the seams.

[Andrew Gwynne]

I pay tribute to councillors of all political persuasions and none for the work they do in serving their communities. I pay tribute to the council officers and dedicated public servants who deliver neighbourhood and care services on the frontline. Years of uncertainty and unfair funding have created a quiet crisis that is now impossible to ignore. Under this Government, the facts speak for themselves: local authorities have faced a reduction to core funding of nearly £16 billion since 2010. That means that councils will have lost 60p out of every £1 that the previous Labour Government provided to spend on local services.

When the Prime Minister entered Downing Street, she promised to build a country that works for everyone, and she then promised an end to austerity. As her time in office probably comes to an end, we are able to reflect on both of those promises. Like in many areas of her leadership, I am sure we will all find that in both those areas she has been sorely lacking.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As usual, my hon. Friend is making a very clear statement about the situation local government finds itself in today. My council is one of the 10 councils to have suffered the heaviest cuts, yet I represent a constituency and a city that is one of the most disadvantaged in the country. It is clear that the decisions that were made about where the cuts should fall have meant that they have been put on the shoulders of the poorest and the most vulnerable, not the richest in society.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. She champions the cause of the communities of Kingston upon Hull. It is one of the most deprived local authorities in England, yet it is one of the areas that have received the heaviest cuts to their spending power since 2010. That was a political choice, and one that has decimated many communities, including the one she represents, across England.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend will come on to this argument, but does he agree that cuts to essential local government services in many areas inevitably lead to additional expenditure elsewhere? I think particularly of the decimation of youth services and early years prevention, which has undoubtedly contributed to the extra stress and extreme youth violence on our streets.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We used to have something called Total Place, which was all the public sector bodies working together towards a single strategy for a local area. What we have seen as a consequence of the austerity since 2010 is a complete breakdown of that collaborative working. It is worse than that, however, because rather than public bodies working together collaboratively, pooling resources and getting the best possible levels of services for communities, we have seen cost-shunting. For the sake of saving money on youth services, we are seeing a rise in crime that is pushing up costs for the police. Because of the cuts to police budgets, those costs are shunted on to other public bodies. That is not a common-sense approach

to dealing with people's needs and services, to building stronger communities or to spending public money wisely.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): On cost-shunting, just this morning we heard from representatives of families with children with special educational needs and disabilities. They were talking about their needs not being met through the education budget, the high needs block from local government or the health needs budget, because each is trying to get the other to pay the bill. Children with special needs and disabilities are falling through the gap and remaining unsupported.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are too many instances across the public sector where cost-shunting is resulting in precisely what my hon. Friend says: vulnerable people falling through gaps that should not exist. I think that in their heart of hearts, Conservative Members, who clearly deal with casework that is similar to ours, will know that that is happening in their areas too.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: If the hon. Gentleman is going to apologise for the cuts he has forced on our local communities, I will give way to him.

James Cartlidge: Very kind of the hon. Gentleman. He was referring to what has happened since 2010. Let us just remind ourselves that the 2010 Labour manifesto said that certain areas would be prioritised and protected. Will he remind us whether that included local government?

Andrew Gwynne: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the 2017 Labour manifesto said that we would put money back into our public services, something that he has failed to do in the almost three years since that general election.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly pertinent speech. Does he not agree that it is completely perverse that public health budgets in York under the Tory-Liberal Democrat council have been slashed, when the NHS 10-year plan says we have to invest in public health?

Andrew Gwynne: It shows precisely the short-sighted way that the Government have approached funding local government. The fact that they passed on public health budgets to local government was, I think, a good move. It was one of the few things in the Lansley Act—the Health and Social Care Act 2012—that I thought was good, because it took back to local councils precisely what they were invented to tackle, which is to improve the health and wellbeing of the citizen. Of course, many councils started off their lives 150 or so years ago as local boards of health. Having that focus on public health and on health and wellbeing is absolutely right, but we cannot do that while cutting those budgets. That is the scandal: the areas that have seen the biggest cuts to their spending power, the areas that have seen the biggest cuts to the revenue support grant, and the areas that have seen the biggest cuts to the public health grant are the ones that need that resource the most.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Let me make a point that neatly sums up what my hon. Friend is talking about. In Chesterfield, we have had a reduction of 43.2%. I took the time to look at the reduction in the Minister's constituency and it is only 12%. That is not a difference of just a couple of per cent. It is three and a half times more in my constituency.

Andrew Gwynne: As my hon. Friend will hear as I develop my argument, that is not just a one-off. It is happening across England and it is unfair. The Tories do not get that blatant unfairness, because they have not seen the same levels of cuts in many of their areas that we have seen, yet the impact that has had on the communities we represent cannot be expressed loudly enough.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I give way to my hon. Friend, who will express loudly the cuts to her area.

Gloria De Piero: Let me take my hon. Friend to Nottinghamshire, where spending on adult social care is now £33 million lower than it was under Labour. That is £71 lower per head, as need is increasing. Is it not always the case under this Government that vulnerable people are paying the price?

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman in a second, if I can answer my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) first. It is worse than that, because those are the headline figures. We know that that local authority will have shifted money that was allocated to neighbourhood services to prop up the people-based services of adult and children's social care, so although social care has been cut in real terms, it would be far, far worse were it not for neighbourhood services bailing out the gaps.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. He talks about unfairness. Does he not recognise that it was under the previous Labour Government, in which he served, that the unfairness was introduced through the funding formula allocations, which shifted resources from local government in shire counties into metropolitan areas such as the one he represents?

Andrew Gwynne: The right hon. Gentleman has made the case for me. Let me dumb it down for him—I do not wish to appear condescending, but it really is as simple as this: there has always been a recognition by Governments of all colours that not every area has the same baseline. Some areas have greater need and often those areas have less of an ability to raise income locally. Because of that, there has been a mechanism, or a formula—for example, whether that was the rate support grant that became the revenue support grant—to ensure that resources from the centre followed need. What we have seen under his Government is a 60% cut to the revenue support grant. Sixty pence in every £1 for the two councils in my constituency, Stockport and Tameside, is a lot of money. A 60% cut to a very small revenue support grant is different—a number of Conservative Members' councils

have only small revenue support grants, or no revenue support grants in some cases. Sixty per cent. of nothing is nothing and that is the unfairness. A 60% cut to my area cannot be filled in by council tax rises, so it means rises in council tax for poorer services. Cuts are cuts—it is as simple as that.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): My area is one that got a really bad deal under past Governments and is still getting a bad deal. Let me build a bit of cross-party support. It is obvious that the Government have to find more money for social care for future year budgets, and it needs to go to my area and some areas represented by Opposition Members. It needs to be done fairly, but what is Labour's current thinking on how much individuals and families should contribute, because in social care, one of the big issues is how much of the family asset and income is at risk? Does it have any new thinking on that?

Andrew Gwynne: Of course, individuals and families are taking the hit from all the cuts, and they are having to step in.

James Cartledge *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: Let me answer the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) first. We have to have a sensible discussion about how we are going to fund social care. Yes, it is about money, and we have pledged to ensure that there is £8 billion for social care—that was in Labour's manifesto in the 2017 general election—and we need to make sure that that commitment remains in our future manifesto and is updated, because it needs that immediate cash injection to start with. However, we also need to look very seriously at how we provide adult social care. I really do wish that we could try to break down some of the politicking that has gone on for far too long—[*Interruption.*] Members can heckle, but it is a fact that before the 2010 general election, Andy Burnham, the then Health Secretary, sat down with the Liberal Democrat health spokesperson and the Conservative health spokesperson to try to work out a way forward. We went into that 2010 general election with poster boards about Labour's "death tax". That serves nobody. We need to make sure that we will have something that is sustainable for the long term, and I hope that we can genuinely get to a place where we can do that and talk about how we fund adult social care and children's services going forward.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and then I need to make progress.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am grateful that my hon. Friend has mentioned children's services. Clearly, the overspend on children's services has hit a new high of £800 million—and of £12 million in Newham alone last year—and it is calculated that this funding gap will get to £2 billion by 2020. Is it not a complete and utter nonsense, and unsustainable for councils, to be told that they should be using what little reserves they still have to keep safe our very vulnerable children?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Politics is a question of priorities. I often remember the 2017 Budget, when the Government put forward measures to cut the bank levy by £5 billion. We tabled an amendment to the Budget proposing that £2 billion of that same money should go to fully funding children's services, because we see precisely the cost-shunting that I talked about earlier with children's services. It is frankly scandalous that vulnerable children and families are not able to access the support that they need.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. I say this, again, in the spirit of co-operation across the Chamber. He makes the point about adult social care. At whatever level it is funded, he and others have pointed out the unfairnesses between different parts of the country because it is funded through local provision. Has he considered, or would he consider, going back to a system where the money is provided and distributed nationally rather than locally, so that this particular problem will be taken off the backs of local government?

Andrew Gwynne: Of course, I would be very happy to look at any suggestion. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) leads on social care issues for the Labour Front-Bench team, but the fundamental issue is that the money has to come from somewhere and some of that has to be centrally provided. We have set out how some extra resources can be put forward for social care.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way later on, but I want to make some progress.

The Prime Minister has said that austerity has ended—she said it in her conference speech last October—but instead of an end to austerity, in January we saw a local government finance settlement that once again cut even deeper into council budgets.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It went up!

Andrew Gwynne: The Minister says it went up, but actually it confirmed what many of us feared, because under this Government there will never be an end to the pain of austerity. Nothing has changed. Let's bust this myth. This year's funding package, while it offered an increase in spending power next year for local government, came with a £1.3 billion extra cut from central Government funding to the revenue support grant. An uplift in spending power has been paid for by local people through increased council tax. That is not fiscal devolution; it is another attempt by this Government to shift the burden on to local taxpayers and to devolve the blame for these decisions to councillors of all political persuasions, including Conservative councillors.

Areas such as the one I represent cannot bring in anything like the resources they need to meet the growing demand for social care and our neighbourhood services through local council tax increases alone. This has left areas with the greatest need unable to mitigate the cuts

imposed by the Government and residents paying more in council tax for services to be stripped back even further.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) made the point that the last Labour Government shifted money from the shire counties to the metropolitan areas. The shadow Secretary of State described them as areas of increased need, but does he recognise that in rural areas such as Lincolnshire, where my constituency is, services cost more to deliver because of the geography?

Andrew Gwynne: The hon. Lady makes the case that in rural areas there are greater costs to providing services. In some cases, that is correct, but it is a minority of cases. All the evidence, including in a report commissioned by the Secretary of State's Department, shows that the opposite is actually true. I do not want to get into an argument with the hon. Lady about how we should cut the cake. The cake is shrinking. We need to grow a bigger cake so that we can share out the slices more fairly. As we continue to shrink the cake, all we do is pit her area against my area and her area's needs against those of the area I represent.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Lewisham Council has had to propose a 2% precept to fund the widening gap in adult social care, yet Lewisham is among the 20% most deprived boroughs. Does my hon. Friend agree that rather than asking some of the poorest to pay more, we need proper funding from central Government for essential adult social care?

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to grow that cake and the distribution of resources has to follow need. If we are serious about tackling health inequalities, if we genuinely want a fairer, more equal country, if we want to narrow the gap in life expectancy between the richest and poorest, which sadly is widening, we will not do it by cutting resources and services in the areas that need them the most.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. A man who gets on the train at Birmingham New Street and gets off in Erdington, either at Gravelly Hill station or Erdington station, is likely to live seven years less than one who continues out into the leafy shires of Four Oaks. Birmingham City Council is the sixth most deprived in the whole country, yet it suffered the biggest cut in local government history—of almost £700 million—with another £80 million to come. Does he agree that what is grotesque about the treatment of a great city such as Birmingham is not just the scale of the cuts—including 12,000 staff gone from the city council—but the unfairness compared with the treatment of some of the leafy shires? Birmingham is high need but is being treated as a low priority.

Andrew Gwynne: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The treatment of the great city of Birmingham has been appalling. The people of Birmingham deserve the resources they need to have decent public services.

He has been a feisty champion of the needs of the people of his constituency and that great city and will continue to make that case.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab) *rose*—

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way to another great Birmingham MP.

Steve McCabe: If ever there has been a city subject to close Government scrutiny it is Birmingham. For five years, it has been subject to the Government's improvement panel, so the Secretary of State knows the financial situation in Birmingham inside out. How does he justify forcing up the council tax in a city where 42% of the children are in poverty?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I will leave it to the Secretary of State to answer that, because I think that Birmingham has been dealt a bad set of cards by this Government.

It is not just Birmingham. Researchers from Cambridge University have exposed the uneven impact of the Government's funding of local government. They have found that since 2010 changes in local authority spending power have ranged from a drop of 46% to a fall of a mere 1.6%. When we compare these reductions to the indices of deprivation, we see that more deprived areas have been forced to undergo bigger cuts in service spending, with smaller spending cuts in the least deprived areas. Nine of the 10 most deprived councils have seen cuts three times the national average.

These findings are backed by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which also suggests that since 2016 the most well-off councils have actually seen an increase of 2.8% to their spending power, while the poorest areas have seen very little growth, despite having faced the largest pressures on their services.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that the fact that eight of the 10 councils receiving the largest cuts are Labour-controlled while eight of the 10 receiving the lowest cuts are Conservative-controlled reinforces the need for this Opposition day debate?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. We have to highlight the unfairness. We have to keep on until the Government wake up, smell the coffee and understand the damage they are doing to the fabric of so many communities in England through cutting our local neighbourhood services and depriving people-based services, such as adult social care and children's services, of the resources they need.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Essex County Council is the second largest provider of children's services by head of population. It has gone from being a failed children's service in 2010 to now being ranked outstanding by Ofsted, despite there being less money going into the service, but because of a focus on early intervention and partnership working. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that what makes a difference is not just funding for our services but how the money is used?

Andrew Gwynne *rose*—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): How can he disagree with that?

Andrew Gwynne: I can disagree with the hon. Lady because, for a start, funding for children's services has increased in Essex. She should perhaps check that. If she is saying there is not a crisis in children's services, she is going against all the evidence put forward by the Conservative-controlled Local Government Association.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I thank my neighbour in the north-west region for giving way. He is making an incredibly impassioned and very pertinent speech. Will he join me in praising Labour-run St Helens Council for protecting services through an integrated St Helens Cares model and the creation of a people's board, but does he agree that even an innovative council that puts its residents first cannot possibly mitigate the funding cuts of 71% that St Helens Council has suffered since 2010? That is simply not sustainable.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pay tribute to Labour councillors like those in his constituency who are making incredibly difficult decisions. They are the last line of defence for many of our communities, and they are doing what they can, but with both hands tied behind their backs by a Government who simply do not understand the basic economics of the areas that we represent.

Emma Hardy: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way shortly, but I want to deal briefly with the issue of social care before I begin my concluding remarks.

The largest of the pressures on services remains the pressure on adult and children's social care. According to the Local Government Association, adult social care services face a £1.5 billion funding gap next year, and £2 billion is needed for children's services.

Given that the Cabinet are too interested in internal machinations, and given the absence of any leadership from the Prime Minister, we have yet to see the much promised social care Green Paper. In fact, this year's April Fool revealed himself to be the Health Secretary after he missed his own new deadline of 1 April for the Green Paper—but no one was laughing, because that was the fifth missed deadline, following the summer of 2017, the end of 2017, the summer of 2018, and the autumn of 2018. Despite those delays, it seems that little progress has been made.

There is so much concern in the sector that last month 15 key organisations—including the LGA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, and NHS organisations and charities—were forced to write to the Government expressing their concern that Brexit was becoming a distraction from any action to deal with the real crisis that is affecting the services on which people rely.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Gwynne: I will give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Mr Betts: There are clearly differences between the cuts made in different authorities, but there is a collective view in local government about the crisis in social care. When Councillor Paul Carter, chair of the County Councils Network and leader of Kent County Council, gave evidence to our Committee during our last inquiry into adult social care, he simply said, “We are approaching a cliff edge.” It is possible that some councils will not immediately follow Northamptonshire over that cliff edge, but it will not be long before they do unless there is a fundamental change in the funding of social care in this country.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Let me say to the Secretary of State that if he will not listen to the Chair of the Committee, he should listen to the leaders of his party’s own councils, who are saying precisely the same. There is a cliff edge, and no action that the Government have taken so far has done anything to remove it. It may have pulled a few councils back and given them a few years before they topple over, but unless we fundamentally change the Government’s approach to social care services, we will not be able to solve the crisis in local government.

For the first time in England, we have seen a standard £2,000 tax bill introduced by a Conservative council. We have also seen the costs of the failures of this Tory Government. For instance, the cost of the failure of Tory-controlled Northamptonshire County Council has been pushed on to local people because the Secretary of State allowed it to raise its tax above normal limits as it grapples with bankruptcy. Local people are paying the price of Tory mismanagement: that is what happens when the Tories do not fund local government and are in charge of the town hall.

Austerity is not over, but across the country Labour councils and councillors are showing that it does not have to be this way. Under the shadow of the present Government, Labour councillors are innovating, standing up against austerity, and protecting local services. They are the torch bearers for the new politics that we will see with the next Labour Government. On 2 May, there will be a clear choice: continued austerity with the Tories, or proper investment, fairness and a real change, with Labour councils making a real difference to the communities they represent.

We need a Labour Government because we need a Government who are committed to funding children’s services, funding adult services, funding neighbourhood services, rebuilding our communities from the grass roots up, putting pride back into civic professions, and encouraging our communities to grow and prosper. We will rebuild this country, for the many and not the few. I commend the motion to the House.

2.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Let me begin my speech in the same way as the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), and underline the House’s complete condemnation of the appalling terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka and also in Northern Ireland.

The timing of the attack in Sri Lanka at Easter, when people were murdered at prayer, was utterly shocking, and has—rightly—been utterly condemned throughout

the House. Our thoughts are firmly with the Sri Lankan community in the United Kingdom, and we send our prayers and condolences in the knowledge that so many people will have lost loved ones. Let me also say, as a former Northern Ireland Secretary, that the brutal murder of Lyra McKee was utterly shocking and disgusting, and that our thoughts and prayers are very firmly with her loved ones, her family and all who cared for her. What an incredible individual she was. At this time, as her funeral is under way, I know that the House will wish to send its thoughts, prayers and condolences to all who love her and all who care for her.

Let me now turn to the subject of today’s debate. Our local authorities and the people who serve them are delivering essential services and changing lives, and it is right that we help them to succeed. I pay tribute to all who work in our local councils up and down the country for the work that they do and the difference that they make to the lives of so many. As Secretary of State, I have made clear my support for local government, and my wish to enable councils to deliver benefits to the people whom they serve. I commend and support those councils, and I look forward to finding new ways in which services can be delivered most effectively, in the spirit of devolution, closer to the point at which they are received.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Let me say gently to the Secretary of State that what he has just said will be taken as weasel words in Harrow, in the context of a 97% reduction in revenue support grant. Can he offer any assurance that he has persuaded the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in the coming comprehensive spending review, to invest in local government health and social care?

James Brokenshire: Let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that this year we have given our local authorities access to £46.4 billion, a cash increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in funding. The settlement includes extra funds for local services, with a strong focus on support for some of our most vulnerable groups. It is part of a four-year settlement that has been accepted by 97% of local authorities, and gives so many areas access to substantially more funding than the least deprived. The average spending power per dwelling for the 10% most deprived authorities in 2019-20 is about 22% more than that for the least deprived.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as part of the process of increasing the funding that is available, we should increase the practice of business rates retention as a way of incentivising local innovation and enterprise? In places like Cheltenham, it provides an incentive to build out things like our cyber-park, which will create a pipeline of local businesses providing income that can be spent on vital public services.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes the point very effectively about the innovation that we see in local authorities and he rightly underlines the work in his own community. Local authorities have campaigned for more flexibility and control over the money they raise, including the ability to create a more self-sufficient

sector funded from their own resources. That includes the move to 75% business rate retention, with the benefits that that brings.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend will consider changing the funding system to reward efficiency. As he knows, councils such as Bromley, which is near his Bexley authority, are historically low-cost authorities that have achieved enormous efficiencies over the years, yet they are asked again and again to make further efficiencies. Does he agree that it is time to adjust their baselines to reflect the historical efficiencies they have achieved?

James Brokenshire: I know that Bromley does incredible work for its local community. It has innovation, efficiency and real quality at the heart of its efforts. Equally, my hon. Friend raises an ongoing issue in respect of our fair funding review—the review of relative needs and resources. As we reflect on the submissions we have received to date in respect of how that balance is struck, we will certainly give careful consideration to a range of factors to ensure that the funds are applied in the appropriate way to recognise the relative needs and resources of individual authorities.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State not recognise that in the case of Birmingham, cumulative cuts of £775 million over a 12-year period are simply not sustainable for a city that has 42% of its children growing up in poverty? Whether or not he accepts that, will he at least do something about the historical underfunding? He will know that the formula for Birmingham was changed to recognise historical underfunding in 2016-17, but because that was not backdated to correct underfunding in the previous two years, Birmingham has been short-changed by £100 million. Will he at least put that right?

James Brokenshire: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that Birmingham is one of the authorities with the highest funding per capita. Equally, I am looking carefully at the representations that he and other Birmingham MPs have made to me. The ongoing strike action in Birmingham, with the non-collection of rubbish and the impact that that is having on communities, clearly has not helped. I therefore urge him to support the council in dealing with the challenges caused by the industrial strife that is being felt very firmly in Birmingham, with all the manifestations that that is creating.

Emma Hardy: Hull City Council has seen a reduction in its funding of 37.8% since 2010. That is having an impact on children with special educational needs and disabilities. Historically, no account has been taken of the number of children with SEND in an area and the amount of funding that it receives for the higher needs block. If the Government are serious about reviewing the way that local authorities are funded, surely that should be something they take into account.

James Brokenshire: I am working closely with the Secretary of State for Education as we look towards the next spending review. I will come on to the support that is being provided for adults' and children's social care, as well as how we are investing further on a number of other fronts. Therefore, we have recognised and reflected on a number of the pressures that we have seen. Clearly,

in the further review of relative needs and resources, and as we look towards the next spending review, I will look at the data and the evidence very closely and carefully.

Toby Perkins: Will the Secretary of State give way?

James Brokenshire: I will give way one last time and then I will make some progress.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful. One thing that has been missing from the debate so far in terms of social care is that the vast majority of domestic visits are carried out by employees of private sector companies, as opposed to employees of local authorities, because most of these services have been outsourced. Huge numbers of those companies are going bust. It surely shows the Secretary of State that the system is unsustainable when 100 care homes have gone bust in the last couple of years.

James Brokenshire: The Minister for Care, who is sitting on the Bench next to me, says that the number of providers is going up. I can assure the hon. Gentleman about the steps that we are taking in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care; the assurances; the quality work that colleagues across Government support and strengthen; and the arrangements that we put in place to step in when there are failures in the market and a failure of supply in relation to a particular provider. When we look at a number of these examples, we can see the work that has gone in to make sure that they are dealt with effectively.

It is about the quality of service. When we look at the broader issues of social care, which many Members across the House have rightly touched on, the focus is on the delivery of care and the delivery of outcomes. Simply spending money is not the answer in terms of delivering the high-quality care and the outcomes that some of the most vulnerable in our society need.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to talk about the quality of care. Does he recognise that Bromley, his next-door neighbour, provides an example of a willingness to participate in close joint working between the health sector and social services? Given that one of the greatest pressures is the growing cost for top-tier authorities of caring for the elderly, will he ensure that the new funding review and the new arrangements enthuse and support authorities that, like Bromley, are prepared to do joint working?

James Brokenshire: Interestingly, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish tried to suggest that there was not good joined-up working, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) rightly highlights some of the good practice that is taking place in the further integration of health and social care. Indeed, the £240 million of funding that has been committed through this year's settlement was very firmly aimed at ensuring that those pressures were taken off the NHS. I pay great tribute to the work that local authorities up and down the country have been engaged in, particularly around things like delayed transfers of care, where there has been a 45% reduction since the high point fairly recently. That demonstrates very clearly how we are making a difference.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way on that point?

James Brokenshire: I will give way one last time, then I will make some more progress.

James Morris: On the delayed discharge of care, we recognise that ultimately there needs to be more integration between health and social care, and more money. The point that my right hon. Friend makes has a lot of impact, because where we have put money into social care and there has been good structural working between local authorities and the health service, we have seen a radical reduction in the delayed discharge of care. It is not all about money; it is about innovative joint working.

James Brokenshire: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. Joint working has been done on delayed discharges of care. It is about ensuring that there is good practice and sharing that more broadly. We are doing that equally in children's social care, where the Department for Education is providing funding to ensure that that is better adopted. It is about good practice and looking at the outcomes. The simple binary approach that the Opposition take is, I think, mistaken.

Another issue on which the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish was fulsome was that of council tax. I want to remind Labour Members that it was the Labour Government who made ordinary families pay the price for their failures, with band D council tax more than doubling under Labour and families paying an extra £750. Even now, Labour wants to abolish the council tax referendum limit, which prevents excessive rises in council tax. It is all very well for the hon. Gentleman to suggest that he is on the side of ordinary hard-working families, but that is not what we saw from Labour in government and it is not what we are seeing now. The real price of Labour is that it always costs you more. This is not just about the cost of a Labour Government; it is also about what people are paying now. Households in Labour-controlled areas have to pay higher council tax to make up for incompetent collection. In the worst-hit areas, Labour councils have unpaid council tax bills of up to £100 million, which is the equivalent of £439 for every household. The 10 councils with the worst collection rates in England are all Labour-run.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is true that Labour is promising £500 billion of extra spending, but what it is not telling ordinary hard-working families is that that will mean an increase in income tax and a doubling of national insurance, council tax and VAT. Those are not my words, but those of a former Labour shadow Chancellor.

James Brokenshire: The interesting thing about some of our earlier exchanges was the acknowledgement that the last Labour Government, going into the 2010 election, did not guarantee to protect local government. We have had to make difficult choices and confront difficult issues to put the public finances back on an even keel, and that has not been easy. I pay tribute to the innovation that councils have been engaged in up and down the country to help us to put this right. It is telling that there was no acknowledgement of that in the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): The Minister is saying that the Tory Government want to spend on things that work. I can tell him that what works is the troubled families programme, which is due

to end next year. Will he take this opportunity to commit to the House to doing everything he can to keep that programme running after 2020?

James Brokenshire: I am glad that the hon. Lady has mentioned the troubled families programme, because I will be talking about that in greater detail later in my speech. I have been hugely impressed by the outcomes of the programme, which, as she rightly points out, is making a difference in people's lives. I strongly believe that the troubled families programme has now shown an evidence base for how it is profoundly doing that. It is doing what has rightly been described across the House as pulling together services to create a person-centric approach, and breaking down some of the silos and barriers. I am a huge champion of the troubled families programme.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): So far, the Secretary of State has blamed striking workers and councils up and down the country. The one group that is not being blamed is his rotten Government: the responsibility for this crisis lies firmly at his door. When will he stop blaming everybody else and take some responsibility for the crisis in this country?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady must equally reflect on the fact that the Labour Opposition voted against a real-terms increase in the core spending available to local authorities this year. That included the additional funding for health and for adult and children's social care. We recognised the pressures and made the right judgments in respect of the pressures that councils explained to us. The Opposition may wax lyrical about funding pressures, but their own councils are not even helping themselves.

The Opposition have some front to claim to be the champions of local government and localism. I took the time to read the shadow Secretary of State's recent speech to Labour's local government conference this year, and it contained some big and bold claims. It is just a shame that they were not backed up by reality. He said that Labour was the party of devolution. I must congratulate him on his selective memory. If I remember correctly, it was his party that, after 13 years, left the UK one of the most centralised countries in Europe. It took the Conservatives in government to roll back the era of centrally imposed targets and the tick-box culture imposed by the Labour party, and it is this Government who have put the public finances back on track and cleared up the mess we inherited from Labour.

Toby Perkins: I am sure the Secretary of State would not want people watching this debate to be misled by what he has just said about police funding. He knows as well as all of us that the reason Labour voted against the spending plans for the police was that we were proposing far greater spending on the police. That is why Labour Members voted against what we saw as his derisory offer to our desperately under-resourced police services.

James Brokenshire: We have given significant investment to the police. Indeed, the Chancellor has made further commitments on some of the most acute pressures that we know are being experienced. I was actually talking about the local government settlement, rather than the

police settlement, which was dealt with separately. However, we made a commitment to providing additional resources, and we are backing the police to deal with the issues of crime.

Robert Neill: I am glad that my right hon. Friend is reminding Labour Members of Labour's record. Someone had to come in and pick up the pieces in 2010. Might he also like to remind them that it was Labour that introduced compulsory capping on council tax levels, reducing the discretion of local authorities? That was then abolished by the Conservative-led coalition. It was Labour that introduced central planning through the directly imposed regional spatial strategies, overriding the wishes of local communities, and it was Labour that enforced compulsory unitary councils in areas that did not want them. One of those decisions was reversed by the Conservative Government in favour of the bottom-up approach brought in by this Government. Labour posing as the party of devolution has more front than Harrods, as my old grandma used to say.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes his point in his inimitable style.

We have promoted a greater sense of devolution, and this comes back to my point about trusting communities, councils and people at the grassroots to get on and deliver for their communities. It is this Government who have given local authorities the tools and resources they need to do their vital work, and it is Conservative councils that are providing value for money and delivering quality services for their residents while keeping council tax lower than in Labour and Liberal Democrat council areas. This includes doing the right thing on recycling, with Conservative councils recycling, reusing or composting around 49% of their waste, compared with 36% under Labour councils. This is about local delivery, which is what much of the current campaign and the votes in the forthcoming local council elections will be about.

Rachael Maskell: One area in which the Secretary of State and the Government have failed to invest since 2010 is staff. The Government may offer warm words, but a 21% real-terms pay decrease for some of the worst paid workers is completely unacceptable. How is the Secretary of State going to address that issue?

James Brokenshire: I hope the hon. Lady will have noticed that, according to the latest figures, real wages are actually going up. I remind her of the fact that pay restraint across the public sector was a consequence of the mess that we inherited from the last Labour Government. I know that this has been difficult; it has been really tough and incredibly hard. Equally, we are determined to maintain the strong economic path for our economy and to ensure that our public finances are now back in the right space and not left in the fashion that the last Labour Government left them in. I am mindful of the essential role our local authorities play in helping the most vulnerable in our society, and I recognise the growth in demand in adult and children's social care and the pressure that that brings.

Mr Betts: I am interested in the exchanges across the Chamber about which party has been the best, or perhaps worst, at the devolution of council funding. It was actually the Thatcher Government who introduced

the capping of rates—it continued with council tax—taking away councils' freedom to set their own business rates. Is it not the reality that neither the previous Labour Government, nor the coalition Government nor this Government have done anything fundamentally to increase the freedom of councils to raise their own funding at a local level? I hope that the Secretary of State will address that when we finally see his devolution framework.

James Brokenshire: I look forward to engaging with the hon. Gentleman and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on issues relating to the devolution of business rates and so many other things. I profoundly believe in the merits and benefits of decisions being taken more locally and of local government having a sustainable position.

I am conscious of the number of Members who want to participate in this debate, so I will now make some progress.

Coming back to social care, £650 million out of the more than £1 billion of extra funding committed to councils at last year's Budget will be going towards adult and children's social care in 2019-20. Of that, £240 million has been allocated to ease pressures on the NHS, which comes on top of the £240 million announced in October to address winter pressures. The remaining £410 million can be spent on either adult or children's social care where necessary to take the pressure off the NHS, meeting the request from local authorities for greater flexibility. Taken with the adult social care precept and the improved better care fund, the Government will have given councils access to £10 billion of dedicated funding, which can be used for adult social care in the three-year period from 2017-18 to 2019-20.

When it comes to protecting our children, we are investing £84 million over the next five years to expand three of our most successful children's social care innovation programme projects. The projects will keep more children at home safely in up to 20 local authorities, but in the long run our work will ensure that our health and care systems are better integrated. That will be our most powerful tool in ensuring we have a sustainable approach in the years to come.

Returning to troubled families, which the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) rightly highlighted, I believe that our programme is helping local authorities to support families with complex needs and to improve outcomes for individuals. The programme has been a catalyst for local services, transforming how they work together, making them more integrated and cost-efficient, and reducing dependency and demand on expensive services. The results speak for themselves. The latest national programme evaluation shows that, when compared with a similar group, targeted intervention saw the number of children going into care down by a third, the number of adults going to prison down by a quarter, juveniles in custody down by a third, and 10% fewer people claiming jobseeker's allowance. While I recognise that there is more to do, the results are a tribute to the tireless efforts of family workers, local authorities and their many partners in our public services and the voluntary sector. This is about so much more than the financial boost that someone can get from a regular wage. It is also about the pride and the dignity that comes with someone being able to take control of their own life.

[James Brokenshire]

The future of this country is not about an ever-growing collection of handouts and entitlements, but about growing prosperity and independence, and that equally applies to local government. This Government are working to build a more confident, self-sufficient and reinvigorated local government. With the end of the current multi-year deal in sight, we clearly need to take a longer view of how we fund councils as we move to a stronger, sustainable and smarter system of local government. This year's preparations for increased business rate retention, a new approach to distributing funding between local authorities, and the upcoming spending review will also be pivotal. Important work is also under way with authorities and the wider sector to better understand service costs pressures.

For years, councils have asked us for more control over the money raised, and we are giving it to them through our plans to increase business rate retention to 75%. In the process, we will provide local authorities with powerful incentives to grow, and authorities estimate that they will retain around £2.5 billion in business rate growth in 2019-20 under the current system—a significant revenue stream on top of the core settlement funding. In addition to more control, councils want and need to see a clearer link between the allocation of resources and local circumstances, and our new fairer funding formula will ensure a more transparent link between local needs and resources and the funding that councils get.

I pay tribute to the leadership and creativity of our councils, which deliver high-quality services for their residents and efficiencies for the taxpayer. We are determined to give them the freedoms and flexibilities they need so that local government can continue to flourish and deliver vital services to meet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. As voters go to the polls at the local elections, this Conservative Government are providing a real-terms increase in spending power for local government and giving councils the freedoms to deliver for their local communities, and hard-working Conservative councillors are providing value for money for hard-working families and the quality services that their residents deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before I call the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesperson, I advise colleagues that about 25 Members want to speak. If everybody sticks to around 10 minutes, we will not need to impose a time limit.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I did not get the chance to correct the Secretary of State, so it is important that I do so now. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) quite rightly mentioned the instability of the care market, but the Secretary of State provided an incorrect impression of the situation. Research by Care England shows that there are now 564 fewer care homes when compared with 2015 and that there has been a net loss of 8,119 care home beds nationwide. The Secretary of State gave an incorrect impression, and we should not carry on the debate after that sort of wrong impression has been given.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for that point of order, which is really more a matter of debate. I do not like debates to be interrupted by points of order, but she has put her point on the record.

2.46 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I associate myself with the comments of the other two Front Benchers about the events over the weekend. I had the honour of being in Jerusalem for Easter and was shocked on Thursday and then on Sunday to hear of such horrific events. I was sitting in a site that is so precious to the three monotheistic faiths when I heard that, after the terrorist attack in New Zealand, we had had violence in Northern Ireland and then the horrific attacks in Sri Lanka.

Turning to this afternoon's debate, I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). Here we are yet again. The Green Paper that we should be debating to consider sustainable funding for social care has been kicked into the long grass five times, and there is no sign of it coming forward. Is that just because the House, the Government and the civil servants are too busy with Brexit, or is there really a lack of ideas on how to solve the situation? The problem, however, is that we should urgently be thinking about a way forward.

The NHS five year forward view was based on game-changing public health changes and funding and increased social care funding and provision, because otherwise all we will see is increased demand at the front door of the NHS and then a blockage and leakage of funds at the back end. The four-hour target that we often talk about does not just measure A&E performance; it is about the flow of patients through the system. If patients cannot get home at the other end, the system simply breaks down.

Local government in England has seen an average 28% cut in funding, and I have been shocked by some of the figures that Members have mentioned, which range from 46% to 75% to 97% cuts in central funding. Obviously, everyone has faced cuts to their budgets, but there has been only a 5% reduction in local government funding in Scotland despite a 7% cut in the resource budget. The situation has been much more protected than has been the case in England. In Wales, there has been an 11% cut.

I welcome the long-term NHS plan because it unpicks some of the damage done by the Health and Social Care Act 2012, particularly by reforming section 75, and it tries to drive integration, which I think Members on both sides of the House would recognise is the only way forward. However, it was disappointing to discover yesterday on the Health and Social Care Committee that local government was not involved, almost at all, in putting together the long-term plan, yet it will be expected to deliver more and stronger social care to relieve pressure on the NHS.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that it should have been a long-term health and social care plan if we actually believe in joined-up, integrated working and that the funding settlement for the NHS, very tight as it is, simply will not work without addressing the underfunding of social care?

Dr Whitford: I utterly agree and, obviously, the Department's name was changed to the Department of Health and Social Care to reflect that need for integration, yet that is not the discussion we are hearing.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a valuable contribution. One of the big problems in social care is the lack of social workers, which local authorities cannot fund because of the gigantic cuts conducted over the years by this Government. It is about time we faced up to the fact that austerity has gone on far longer than the second world war and, quite frankly, rationing.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman talks about the workforce, but in both the NHS funding settlement and the forward plan we see a big injection into NHS England, but no extra funding for Health Education England or for public health. Preventing illness is the cheapest thing we can do yet, for decades, Governments of all colours in all places have failed to do that. Unfortunately, the long-term plan does not do it, either.

Age UK talks about 1.5 million people being left without sufficient care and support at home, and it describes the number of people needing elderly social care increasing by almost 50% since 2010, but local authority-funded patients in England are down by a quarter over that time. A third of patients depend on family support, but 2 million carers are over 65 themselves, and 400,000 of them are over 80. Look at the burden we are putting on elderly people to care for their elderly partners, often without respite or support.

Emma Hardy: I recently spoke to an elderly couple. The lady was caring for her husband who had Alzheimer's, which was having such a devastating impact on her health that she ended up having to go into hospital, too. She was not worried about being ill and having to go into hospital; what was upsetting her was that her husband was left without anybody to care for him in an environment he did not know or understand. Surely this situation needs to change.

Dr Whitford: Absolutely. We should value family carers and the care and work they do, right across the United Kingdom, for people who need help in all our communities, yet they are so poorly valued. Carer's allowance does not even equal jobseeker's allowance, which is something we have tried to repair in Scotland, but obviously we do not know whether that money will simply be clawed back by the Department for Work and Pensions in other benefits. That is always the problem. We are supporting carers so poorly. Not only do they have the physical burden and the lack of time to look after themselves, but often they are in financial difficulty.

Scotland is the only one of the four nations to provide free personal care, which we have been providing since 2002. Having integrated health in 2004, we have been working since 2014 to try to integrate health and social care, which is a lot more difficult. The social care environment is different. It has multiple companies and different set-ups. It is means-tested, rather than being provided free. Social care is a real challenge, and therefore local authorities and the health structures within any local health system will require support and funding to work out how to achieve it so that they are wrapped around the patient, not bitching about whose purse the

money will come out of. As we have heard today, the problem is that there simply is not enough money in the purse to start with.

In Scotland, we now allocate half of our health funding to integrated joint boards, which are made up of health and local authorities, to look at how we provide primary healthcare, mental healthcare, social care and children's services so they are driven locally and take account of all the support that is required.

There are three main groups that require social care. First, the elderly. Many of us are heading that way ourselves, and the No. 1 important thing is to maintain people's independence for as long as possible. That is the importance of not rationing surgery for hips, knees and eyes. If we can keep people seeing and walking, and if we can give them a bus pass so that they are out and about with their cronies down the town, they will stay independent and functional for longer.

Of course we have the frail elderly, who require to be looked after in comfort and support. By their own choice, that would be in their own home if at all possible. In Scotland, home care hours have been increased from six hours to 12 hours a week, which has allowed us to keep people with greater dependency at home. Looking at A&E attendances and emergency admissions over the past five years, we can see that Scotland's increase—we are all facing increased demand—has been only one third of that in England. That is why we have had our best performance against the four-hour target since March 2015. It is a combination of supporting people not to arrive at the hospital door and not to be stuck at the other end, because we have driven down delayed discharges every year.

When we talk about numbers such as four-hour targets, it is important that we remember that they are a thermometer taking the temperature of the acute system. They look at how we bring people through. Everyone in hospital wants to get home. They do not want to be stuck there.

The next group is people facing end of life, and they would like, if possible, to be cared for with dignity at home. They want to be with their family but, equally, they do not want to be a burden to their family. If they need respite, they want to have access to it. Since 2015, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities agreed that even people under 65 will be provided with free social care if they are defined as facing end of life, which means they will not be stuck in hospital facing a means test that fritters away their remaining weeks and days of life. A quarter of us will die in a care home, and we want to make sure that we would be happy with the quality of care in that care home, rather than living in squalor or being mistreated.

The third big group is the working-age disabled. For them, quality of life, mobility and, particularly, participation in society are critical. Both in England and Scotland, almost half of local authority social care spending is on people of working age. We tend automatically to think that social care means the elderly. Two thirds of the working-age disabled told a survey that they are not given any help or signposting, and a majority said they are not given enough hours to help them live independently.

Frank's law comes in this month in Scotland, which means that those under 65 with dementia, motor neurone disease or multiple sclerosis will also be eligible for free

[Dr Whitford]

personal care. The law is named after Frank Kopel, the footballer who unfortunately developed dementia very early.

Workforce is a challenge for all of us. Our workforce has gone up 12% in the past three years, but all care providers report difficulties in recruiting, and Brexit is only making that worse. We need to value care, and we need to let it develop as a career. People should be paid the real living wage, not the pretend living wage, for all the hours they work, including at night. A carer coming into a patient's house for 15 minutes to throw them out of bed, particularly a carer that patient has never seen before, is not providing quality of care. We need continuity between the patient and the carer. Caring needs a career structure to ensure that people stay in the profession and develop, grow and lead others.

It was said that the UK Government Green Paper would give us a chance to rethink funding, but we still have not seen it to enable us to debate the options. Will that be done by a rise in national insurance, or by continuing national insurance after retirement for better-off pensioners? People have mentioned the German and Japanese systems, but we need to look at the pluses and minuses of both. By 2030, the number of 85-year-olds will have doubled. We need to prepare to look after them, and to give them independence and dignity, so that they do not end their lives in complete misery and squalor.

3 pm

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. It is an important debate, so I thought the tone set by the Opposition spokesman at the start was a real pity. The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), ran through things in a very selective manner. It was almost as though he had been in a time machine and missed out certain periods and certain significant challenges faced by the country. He did not acknowledge the situation in which the Labour party left the public finances in 2010, with a deficit running at £150 billion a year and the Government borrowing £1 of every £4 that they spent—the taxpayer was footing the bill for that. Nor did he acknowledge that at the time, unemployment was rising and employment was going down, so people were losing their jobs.

Something had to be done, and the ship had to be steadied. We have seen the results of that, and we now have record employment, record low unemployment and rising wages. Achieving that has involved many difficult decisions. I, for one, know how hard local government has worked, the sacrifices that it has made and the sacrifices that people have made. I pay tribute to councillors across the country, and particularly to Conservative councillors, who operate better-run authorities at lower cost. I also thank council officers, who have worked extremely hard to deal with the challenges that we have faced. They have made a massive contribution to the reduction of the deficit.

I am concerned that so far, this debate has been one-sided. The hon. Gentleman talked about the reduction in revenue support grant and direct money from Government, and that has certainly happened. However, he did not mention the other side of the equation,

namely business rate retention and council tax, and he tried to present a distorted picture of individual local authorities' funding. The reality is that the authorities that he described as worse off actually have the highest spending power.

I am setting out the approach that the Opposition have taken, but I think they should instead have looked at the challenges and considered how we might address them in a sensible and measured way. I am certain in my mind that we need to put more money into local government, and the Government are starting to do so. Spending power is on the increase, and since 2017 up to £10 billion has been made available to local authorities to fund social care. The Opposition's motion mentions £8 billion being put into social care during this Parliament, but the Government are already putting in more than that.

There are significant pressures on social care, whether it is children's social care, where there are more looked-after children; adult social care, where we have an ageing population—that is a great thing, but it means that we have to support more people in their later years—or the important group of people of working age who require social care, such as adults with learning disabilities or people with complex needs who need support. Those groups are all growing in size, and we need to make sure that they are looked after for the future.

In addition to increasing demand, services face challenges from rising costs. The national living wage is going up, and companies now have to pay additional pension costs. That is a good thing, because it means that additional money is being paid to people who do the extremely important and difficult job of supporting the most vulnerable. We need to make sure that those employees are paid more, that they are trained well and that the job becomes more professional, so I welcome those things, but they present challenges. We need to work out in a sensible and measured way how we will pay for the additional provision that is, and will continue to be, required.

The Opposition spokesman talked about how the Labour plans for social care were blown out of the water by the Conservatives during the 2010 general election. I thought that was a bit rich, because that is exactly what the Labour party did to the Conservatives at the 2017 general election. If we are going to have a debate, let us have a sensible, measured and proper one, rather than just talking about how big our pile of cash is and listening to the other side say, "We will create a bigger pile of cash to pay for social care."

We have to acknowledge who is going to pay for social care, and we have to get the balance right. We cannot expect young people who have just entered the labour market—people who are starting work and trying to make their way in life—to pick up the whole tab. We cannot expect older people who have worked all their lives and built up assets to lose all those assets because they need care. We have to look at the matter carefully and proportionately, and try to make sure that there is a balance. We must provide the support that people need but reward people for doing the right thing.

Clearly, local authorities provide much of social care, but we need to look at how that fits in with other social care provision. For example, I always find that continuing healthcare is a real bone of contention. The system is opaque and hard for relatives to navigate. It is hard for people to figure out why their relatives are not eligible

when somebody in the neighbouring bed is eligible. It can take forever for a claim to go through. I have known a number of cases in which, unfortunately, relatives passed away some time before a continuing healthcare claim was settled.

Mr Betts: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Anybody who has dealt with families in that position knows that money may be suddenly withdrawn after a continuing healthcare review goes through. Very often, an elderly person will be transferred to another home because they can no longer afford the one they are in. Is that not something that we need to sort out in advance of a fundamental reform of social care? It is a significant problem.

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman knows a great deal about the subject, and I certainly think that the issue he mentions needs to be looked at, as does the wider system.

We need to look at how social care works in the context of the wider health system. We need integration; we have talked about integration for years, and it does happen, but we need a system that is simple enough for people—for relatives, in particular—to understand and navigate. We need to make sure that the different parts of the system work together. Public health must work with primary care, and our GPs must work well with our acute sector. We must all work together with one common purpose, which is to keep people out of hospital for longer. That is how to improve people's quality of life and reduce the cost to the taxpayer.

I wish to mention a small but important example from my constituency: a doctors' surgery called Whitestone Surgery. I declare an interest because I am a patient there. I mention Whitestone because it does fantastic work through its patient participation group and social prescribing. The patient cohort in the catchment area is made up of relatively older people, and many of the patients who go into the surgery are passported through to the PPG, which runs several activity streams, including an allotment, days out and the odd visit down the pub for a meal at lunchtime. All those sorts of activities are really improving the situation in the area by reducing social isolation and loneliness. As a result of that ongoing work, the surgery is seeing the prescription of a significantly lower amount of antidepressants and fewer people being diagnosed with dementia than at other surgeries with a similar patient cohort. Warwickshire County Council is considering the work at the surgery carefully with regard to expanding it throughout Warwickshire, and studies are also being undertaken to see what merit it has more widely. I am delighted that such important work is taking place in my area. It is a good example of what we need to do to support people.

Local government has done its bit and is doing its bit for the deficit, and we need to support local government going forward. Now that we have the public finances far more under control, we need to put more funding into other services, such as the police and schools. We also need to think about how funding is distributed, because currently the fairness is not there—for example, the people of Warwickshire get a raw deal compared with people in many metropolitan areas. We also need to think about the context and the effect that putting more money into public services has on our public finances. We need to think about the effect on what tax people

need to pay. In the light of those things, the motion does not address the whole picture. It is based purely on a political slant and is not there to support the people whom everyone in this Chamber wants to support. I am afraid the motion is there just to score a few points, so I shall not support it.

3.12 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): As the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, I think the importance that Select Committees have attached to the issue of social care is shown in the amount of time we spend on inquiries on the issue. We have recently published three reports on adult social care, the last of which was done jointly with the Health and Social Care Committee last year. They were all unanimously agreed by our Committee, and in the latter case by the Committees jointly. We are currently inquiring into children's social care, with the report due out next week. Those four social care inquiries show how important the issue is for the Committee and for local government as a whole.

As a Sheffield MP, I have to comment on the fact that my city and constituency have received funding cuts that are far higher than the average percentage in the past nine years, since 2010. Like other northern cities, we have been disproportionately hit, as cities with the greatest problems and needs have seen the Government cut their grants by the biggest percentage.

Putting all that to one side, if I look at the wider context, I see real problems for local government, because as a whole local government has had bigger cuts by percentage than any other area of Government spending. That has united councils of all political persuasions in their concerns about the unfair effect those spending cuts have had on local government as a whole. This comes at a time when demand for the main local authority services—care services—has been rising. The number of elderly people has been growing, which has meant that the number of elderly people who need care has been growing. That is great, because people are living longer. The number of people of working age with disabilities—an element of care that we should not forget—has also been growing, which is another success. In percentage terms, the demand for children's services is going up faster than demand for any other current aspect of local government spending, so that comes on top of what I have described, too.

Those three rising demands mean that despite the fact that more people are in need of elderly care, according to Age Concern some 1.5 million people are not getting it. The threshold has been raised such that people with lower and moderate needs are now excluded from the care systems. People are ending up in hospital who should not be there because prevention is not happening, and people in hospital are not being discharged as quickly as they should be. We see all these things happening as a result.

The pressures on social care are causing other issues. With rising demand and spending on social care, as the cake has shrunk, the proportion of it spent on social care has grown, so the amount spent on other services has proportionately been cut by even more. The National Audit Office has done the figures, and they were given to the Select Committee: cultural and related services have seen a 35% cut; highways services and transport

[Mr Clive Betts]

have seen a 37% cut; housing services, including homelessness and private sector housing, have seen a 45% cut; environmental and regulatory services have been cut by 16%; and planning has been cut by 50%. Those are massive cuts to the basic services on which we all rely day to day.

I worry about all that, because although it is of course important that councils concentrate on care, most people in the country do not receive care for themselves or for people in their families on a daily, regular basis; they rely on other services. They are seeing their council tax bills rise and what they get for their money fall. That is a real challenge and problem for local democracy. People are paying more but not getting any more. We ought to be very concerned about that indeed. It needs to be addressed in the widest sense.

I refer to the comments made by Councillor Paul Carter, but people from the Local Government Association, the County Councils Network, the District Councils' Network, London Councils, and SIGOMA, the special interest group of municipal authorities, have made similar comments. Every council organisation has said that the current situation simply cannot continue and that we need a fundamental change in the amount of money provided for local government in the next spending review. The Select Committee will do an inquiry into that, which will hopefully give Ministers the ammunition with which to badger and berate the Treasury when they have discussions at that level.

We know from the estimates, which no one from the Government has challenged, that by the end of the next spending review children's services are likely to be £3 billion adrift of the funding they need. Social care for the elderly is already £2 billion adrift, with estimates that the average annual increase required to keep pace with demand is around £800,000. That takes us to around £7 billion adrift.

The quality of care is often forgotten about. We need not only to continue to meet the increase in demand, but to do something to improve quality. If demand is going to increase, we are going to have to recruit more staff, and if we recruit more staff, we are going to have to pay them and train them better; otherwise, we will not be able to retain them. So the costs are going to go up even further.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I speak as a co-chair of the all-party group on social care. Next week, we are launching an inquiry into the professionalisation of the social care workforce. My hon. Friend is making an important point about recruitment and retention and the need for more funding. The pressures and demands on funding are leading to a reduction in the professionalisation of the workforce, and as a result to reductions in the quality of care.

Mr Betts: Absolutely. The joint Committee report made the point that the quality of care is so important, and we have to think about the quality of the workforce and how much we pay them. The average social care worker gets paid 29% less than someone doing a similar job in the NHS. That figure demonstrates the challenge that we face.

What are we looking at, then? We have recently had a few welcome sticking plasters of funding from the Government; but next time, we will need a very large bandage, not just a few sticking plasters, to put this issue right. We look forward to the Green Paper, at some point on the horizon. Perhaps the Minister can tell us about the timing for that when she replies, but even now time is now too short for there to be a fundamental change in funding arrangements. We are going to need a lot more of the same.

The two Select Committees recommended that, at the funding review, we take the £7 billion extra that will be in the local government system from the 75% business rates retention and, instead of using it to replace public health grants and other forms of grant, we put it back into the system to deal with the problems of social care. That money can be there and we will not have to change the system. That can be done. We also proposed changes to make the council tax system fairer and less regressive. We can do those things for the next spending review and make sure that a quantum of money—around £7 billion—is available for social care. That would then relieve the pressure on other council services.

We then looked at what the longer-term system should look like. Of course, we need better integration at a local level between the NHS and social care. This is not about a national system of care that replaces what local authorities do; it is about better integration at local level. We must bear in mind that, while it is important that the health service and social care are linked together, the other great join-up that we must have is between housing and social care. The majority of people receiving social care live in their own home, and it is vital that we get those services linked as well.

Emma Hardy: Does my hon. Friend agree that we also need to include education on support for children with special needs and disabilities?

Mr Betts: Absolutely. We need integration on that level as well. The point is that these services are better joined up and delivered at a local level. It is an important role that local government has to play, and it is why local government's hand should be strengthened in these matters.

In coming to our conclusions about long-term arrangements, the joint Select Committee inquiry looked at two very important bases. We went to Germany to see what existed there. Essentially, Germany's model involves an extra percentage on the insurance payments that it gets from the public. There was a cross-party agreement 20 years ago, and the rates in Germany have been raised with no dissent from the public or the parties. It is a system that works and that people agree with, because they know that the money goes into social care. That is what we looked at, and it helped form the basis of our conclusion.

We had a citizens assembly—it was a great experience. We selected around 50 people from all over the country. They met for two weekends in a hotel in Birmingham, and came to unanimous views about how we should deal with social care funding. The principles were clear: we should have a system similar to that of Germany, with a social care premium, as we recommended, but very importantly—the Treasury hates this—the money must be dedicated for social care. People are willing to

pay more if they know where the money is going. That was a fundamental principle that was laid down. There was also the principle of universal and high-quality care, and the point was made that a well-paid and well-trained workforce was needed to deliver it.

We also said that there had to be fairness between the generations and that the social insurance premium should be paid only by people over 40. However, we thought that it was fair to say that people of pensionable age who work should also pay. Another issue that we felt needed to be dealt with was the unfairness of people losing their homes in some cases and of all their assets going to pay for social care. The suggestion was that we could bring in a floor and cap system to make sure that people do not pay anything up to a much higher level and do not pay any more beyond the cap. We can pay for that by simply taking a percentage of inheritance tax, so that everybody pays a bit towards the system. We thought that that was fair.

We also said that, ultimately, we want to work towards a system where social care—personal care—is actually free. We did not think that we were there yet, which was why we recommended these changes to begin with, but we thought that we could get there eventually. We said that the extra money coming in had to be on top of the existing local government system.

This is a very good report. Two Select Committees unanimously agreed how we should raise the money for social care in the future. I say to Members on both Front Benches: why bother with the Green Paper? They should produce the White Paper and get on with it. The solution is there. We have given it to Ministers and shadow Ministers. This is a very good proposal. Please get on and deliver it now for the future.

3.24 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee. I agree with everything that he said in the last part of his speech. It is a shame that his Front-Bench team did not take a similar approach. The shadow Minister spoke for nearly 40 minutes and did not come up with one solution or proposal as to how we improve social care.

I am a great believer in the idea that it is not what you do but the way that you do it. In the same way, I believe that it is not how much you spend but how you spend it that makes the difference. As someone whose constituency falls in the county of East Sussex, which has the highest number of over-85 year olds in the country, I can speak with first-hand knowledge about the pressures on our social care system. I am not saying to the Minister that East Sussex does not need more funding, because it most definitely does. East Sussex has set up its Better Together system, working hand in hand with the NHS. Last winter, by working with the clinical commissioning groups and funnelling money into community care beds, it managed to reduce its delayed discharges by 33%, and that was despite an 11% increase in demand. The £2.5 million extra given to East Sussex by the Government this winter went into the system and, as a result, there were no delayed discharges or ambulances queuing up at the hospitals' closed A&Es. The system was able to cope even with an increased number of norovirus and flu outbreaks.

Last year, we were subjected to urgent question after urgent question about the winter hospital crisis. Sadly, even with the system coping so well this winter, we have not had any acknowledgement of how hard NHS staff and local council staff have worked to ensure that, despite the extra pressure, there was no winter crisis this year. That success is because councils and the NHS are working much better together than they have ever done before.

We need to see what East Sussex is doing across the board. Although it is welcome that we now have a Health and Social Care Department, we are not seeing that joined-up working at a national level. I am concerned that if we do not see that joined-up work across the board, the £20 billion extra going into the NHS will be eaten up by the pressures on social care. If patients do not get the social care they need, their health will deteriorate, they will be admitted more often, they will be sicker when they are admitted and they will be in for longer periods of time. Their discharges will be delayed and their outcomes will be poorer. Not funding social care properly, or not using that money wisely, is a penny-wise and pound-foolish approach.

When this Session comes to an end and we have a new Queen's speech, I hope that social care will be top of the agenda. I wish to see three things. First, there is the funding of social care. I am sad that the amendment to this Opposition day motion was not selected. I too have a copy of the report of the joint Select Committees, "The long-term funding of adult social care". The hon. Member for Sheffield South East is right: instead of having a Green Paper, let us just get on with the recommendations in this report, because there is cross-party support for looking at a social care premium system, such as the one in Germany. We must be honest with the British public: there will need to be funding for social care. We need to have something, instead of people who have worked hard all their lives selling their homes to pay for social care—and not realising that that is what they will have to do—or refusing social care until they reach a crisis point and then have to pay for it.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I invite my hon. Friend to agree that, notwithstanding her radical suggestion, which was also made by the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, about not bothering with the Green Paper, it would nevertheless be helpful if the publication of the Green Paper was now actually announced as a date—not as a month, a season or even a festival, which is the latest estimation we have had, but actually as a date.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is quite right. I am being slightly facetious in saying that we do not need to bring out the Green Paper. However, it would be very welcome indeed if the Green Paper contained some of the Select Committee's recommendations.

We need a long-term funding solution, and I have discussed this with the Minister previously. The four-year settlement for local government was really helpful. If local authorities could have a 10-year settlement like the NHS has just had, they could do far more with their money, even if they were not seeing the significant increases that they would particularly like.

My third request is to look at the better use of our healthcare and social care professionals. We have grown up with a historical medical model that has depended on doctors and GPs, but people often need a diverse

[Maria Caulfield]

range of professionals to help them. The East Sussex Better Together model has just announced its community pharmacy programme, which is improving communications for patients discharged from hospital and helping them with their medication. The transfers of care around medicine project, or TCAM, is enabling those patients at risk of delayed discharges or readmission to hospital to have a dedicated pharmacist to help them, because we know that having problems with medication is one of the core reasons that people fail when they are discharged from hospital.

Under the community pharmacy programme, pharmacists would have access to patients' medications, and would be able to answer their questions, monitor side effects and issue repeat prescriptions—things that often do not happen when someone is discharged home. The research and evidence base show that following such a model will reduce admissions and length of stay, and give patients a better experience and better outcomes. Some 112 pharmacies in East Sussex are going to take part in the project, which is a joint working venture between the county council and the clinical commissioning groups. I encourage the Minister to look at rolling this scheme out across the country, so that we can move away from being so dependent on GPs and doctors. I am conscious that there are a number of doctors in the House this afternoon. Doctors do valuable work, but there are other healthcare professionals that we should also be using.

This is not just about funding. Although the Government have given £20 billion extra for the health service, funding for local councils has increased by £1.3 billion this year—an increase of 2.8% compared to last year—and we have given extra money for winter funding, it is what authorities do with that money that makes the biggest difference. We need a long-term solution and a specific funding supplement, as recorded and recommended by the Select Committee. We also need to make better use of some of the fantastic resources that we sometimes fail to recognise. We can do a lot more, even with the existing resources. I am disappointed that the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson did not take the same tone as the Chair of the Select Committee, because we can do more to improve the lives of our constituents.

3.32 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am very pleased to speak in this debate, which I thank my Front-Bench colleagues for securing. This is our first Opposition day debate for goodness knows how long; it has been so long that I have lost track. It is important that we have this debate just about a week before hundreds of local councillors and council candidates from all parties go to the polls across the country.

The House recognises that we have been embroiled in the Brexit nightmare for the last few months, as have the Government, but the vital work of local government has continued in the meantime. That includes the vital work of hundreds, if not thousands, of local councillors to ensure that all our local communities are provided with the services and support on which they depend. We often forget that local councillors give an awful lot of time for not very much reward in order to keep the wheels of local democracy running, and they are currently doing so in unprecedentedly difficult circumstances.

Central Government funding for local councils such as mine in Exeter has been cut by a massive 60% since 2010, and that has put an intolerable strain on councils' budgets and their ability to deliver local services. Let us not forget that this has come on top of the big cuts to the police service, the fire service, schools and other local services. There can be few of us, or our constituents, who have not experienced the impact of these cuts—whether through the loss of a teacher or classroom assistant from one of our schools, difficulty in obtaining the care we need for a vulnerable child or elderly relative, the absence of a local police officer from the streets in our area, or the unrepaired potholes in the streets outside our front doors.

At the same time that the Government have cut support to local councils such as mine in Exeter, they have expected them to raise more of their own funds that they spend locally through the local council tax. That is why my constituents and others around the country have now faced year upon year of above-inflation increases to their council tax. As we all recognise, council tax is a very unfair tax. Unlike income tax, which funds central Government, council tax does not accurately take into account people's ability to pay. For example, this year Devon County Council, which levies the bulk of Exeter's local council tax, has put up its charge by 3.99%—let's call it 4%—and the Conservative police and crime commissioner has raised her council tax by a whopping 12.75%. That means that my constituents in Exeter now pay significantly more through their council tax for policing than for all of the local services provided by Exeter City Council.

Those cuts in Government support have inevitably meant that local councillors have had to make difficult and in some cases unpopular decisions. The Prime Minister announced at the Tory party conference last autumn that austerity, the era of cuts, was over, but that simply is not true. Exeter City Council has to find a further £3.9 million of savings this year and next. So far, its good financial management and our city's relative economic success have enabled our council to do that without damaging cuts to vital local services while the Labour council maintains one of the lowest district council tax rates in England. Our council also has ambitious but essential plans to tackle transport congestion, provide more council housing and social housing, and to do much more in the years ahead, but the longer austerity and Government cuts go on, the more challenging delivering that vision becomes.

I congratulate the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), on his excellent speech on the subject of social care. We are all keenly aware of the crisis in our social care services and the devastating knock-on impact it is having on the health service and other services—indeed, the Health and Social Care Committee has written and published countless reports on and conducted countless inquiries into the matter.

I echo my hon. Friend in sincerely urging the Government and our own party's Front Benchers to give serious consideration to the excellent recommendations we published following our Committees' joint inquiry last year. It is often said that solving the problem of long-term sustainable funding for social care is impossible—it is simply too difficult to reconcile the different interests,

and too controversial for politicians to agree. Well, we did in our joint inquiry. Politicians from across the political spectrum, from what one might call the hard right or the Thatcherite right to the socialist left, unanimously agreed a blueprint that gives any Government a sustainable and equitable solution to the challenges of long-term social care funding. Until we crack that problem, we will not be able to resolve many of the other problems and challenges that have been and will be raised in this debate. Will the Government use our report as the starting point for their Green Paper when it is at last published, whenever that may be?

As we face the elections in eight days' time, I pay tribute to all local government bodies and local councillors of all parties, who have had a pretty thankless task in recent years but who have none the less achieved some amazing things. In particular, I thank and pay tribute to the leader of Exeter City Council, Pete Edwards, who is retiring next week. Pete is an old-style Labour leader, a local Exonian lad who became a bus driver and rose up through the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers to run our city for the past 10 years—and what a challenging 10 years it has been. His no-nonsense approach, which can at times come across as rather gruff, may not be to everyone's taste, but those of us who know Pete well and who have worked with him closely over the years know that he has always had the interests of Exeter and its people at the very heart of everything he has done. It is no surprise that under Pete's leadership Exeter has risen to become one of our most successful and thriving cities. That is in no small part down to him, so thank you, Pete.

3.38 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). He spoke about a blueprint; I have read that report and I remain unconvinced that it absolutely nails down who would pay and how much, which is of course the toughest part of these decisions. None the less, it is a very good proposal and I respect that.

Like the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the right hon. Gentleman referred to cuts in local government funding since 2010. I hate to labour the point—it is a political point—but we cannot avoid asking ourselves why those cuts were necessary. The motion mentions sustainability, as does the Independent Group's amendment, or what we might call the TIG amendment. But the cause of our problem was unsustainability in the public finances and the economy, with a huge growth in all kinds of borrowing, including private borrowing, mortgage borrowing and public borrowing prior to the crash, and public spending commitments based on unsustainable tax income from, for example, city bonuses. That was never going to be sustained. It was always going to end in a big crash, and—guess what?—it would always fall to us to step in and fix the problem.

Labour MPs may deny that. I asked the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish whether Labour's 2010 manifesto protected local government. As he did not answer, let me remind the House what the manifesto said:

"Labour believes we should protect frontline spending on childcare, schools, the NHS and policing, and reform our public services to put people in control."

Note the absence of local government funding. It goes on to say—this is the key line:

"We recognise that investing more in priority areas will mean cutting back in others."

In other words, if an area of spending was not protected, it would get a right old shellacking, which is what happened under us. We did the same thing. We had priority Departments that we protected, but at a time when the deficit is very high, if we protect some Departments—which is perfectly justified, as we did with the NHS—others will take a disproportionate hit. That would have happened under Labour. I honestly do not say that for the purpose of political point scoring. It is to underline the reality that there is no parallel universe where there would not have been a significant hit to the grant given from central Government to local authorities after 2010.

Norman Lamb: To go back to trying to find solutions to the problem that we face, the hon. Gentleman mentioned the joint Select Committee report. Does he agree that we need a new funding stream, as the Select Committees suggest, and that the best way to achieve a sustainable solution is to work cross-party, as the Select Committees did, to come up with a solution? Even if they do not have all the detail yet, that is clearly the right way to achieve a sustainable settlement.

James Cartlidge: That is a good point, and I will come to that. I make what is essentially a political point about Labour's manifesto because we have to get into our heads the idea that there will never again be a time when local authorities do not have to make difficult decisions and look for efficiencies and innovation. The idea that there will always be a cavalry that can come over the hill and, with the wave of a magic wand, summon up central Government funding—which, by the way, does not grow on trees, but also has to come from taxpayers—is wrong.

Colleagues are right to mention good examples of best practice and innovation. In my constituency, I have two district councils and two wards of West Suffolk. West Suffolk is a newly merged council of St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Forest Heath District Council, and savings have been made through that process. Babergh district is entirely contained within South Suffolk. It is not a merged district council. There was a referendum on whether Babergh should merge with Mid Suffolk. Babergh voted to remain independent from Mid Suffolk, but they merged their back offices, and there have been huge efforts to achieve savings and efficiencies. Babergh has left its head office in Hadleigh in my constituency and is now based in Ipswich, outside the district, which has been unpopular but has saved money. It has set up a joint venture to renovate and restore its old headquarters and make them a commercial asset. The point is that those sorts of changes by district councils will always be required.

Suffolk County Council has seen huge innovation in relation to social care, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who is on the Front Bench but cannot speak in the debate, will know. Councillor Beccy Hopfensperger has done great work as the cabinet member for social care in Suffolk. Through the use of technology, the council is saving money, driving down costs and improving care. For example, sensory apps are being used, so that families can know

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whether their loved one who is able to stay at home is moving around and mobile—in short, that he or she is well. Such technological innovations can help to reduce the cost of care and deliver better care.

On the broader question that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) raised about the sustainable funding of social care, I feel passionately about this issue. The biggest issue in British politics begins with b, and it is not Brexit by a long chalk; it is Beveridge. The welfare settlement we have in this country covers the whole of the state pension, the NHS, social care and every aspect of the contract that we all thought we had entered into, but the system is not remotely sustainable. If we look at the Office for Budget Responsibility's forecasts for just NHS spending 50 years from now, we see that it estimates we will be spending the same again in real terms as we do on the NHS now because of changing technology, demand and so on, so we have a huge challenge ahead of us.

On the specific point about paying for social care, I recently had a constituency surgery at which an elderly lady came to see me because her husband has a very difficult condition and she wanted to know what support was available to her. She felt she was in that category of my constituents who are neither so poor that they receive lots of help nor wealthy enough to be able to afford to fund a good lifestyle. I asked her, "What about your house? Do you have housing assets?" She said, "Yes. We have a house worth about £700,000, with no mortgage." However, in her eyes, she has no money.

This issue of housing and assets is always going to be the most controversial point, as we discovered to our cost at the last general election. The residential housing assets of those aged over 65 is worth between £1 trillion and £1.4 trillion, depending on which estimate we look at, and that is a staggering sum. We have to accept that at the core of this issue—and this is the reason why it is so controversial—those entering the workplace today will not have occupational pensions and will not build up such a level of housing equity. That is highly unlikely because, in my view, we will not see such a period of high house price inflation again; it is not sustainable. We are reaching a point where those paying into the system are seriously questioning whether they will get the same benefit as those who retire today.

This intergenerational issue is no one's fault; no one designed it that way. In fact, the welfare system I have mentioned, the Beveridge system, was built with the very best of intentions for a post-war country. However, the thing we need—and I will conclude with this key point—is honesty. That was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who is a nurse, and I greatly respect the expertise she brings to this issue. In this populist, Trumpian era, the one thing that will make this work is all of us being open and transparent about the tough choices we are going to have to make. No one is going to have a free option. There is no free option: every option available is going to cost.

I happen to think that the best option will involve some use of housing equity, perhaps with a choice for people to pay through an alternative method if they do not want to bind themselves into that. In relation to those entering the working population, I think we should look at the success of auto-enrolment. How many people here have had emails from constituents complaining

about the rise in pension contributions from their salary from auto-enrolment? I have not had a single email because people believe it is a contribution from which they will benefit. It is not like the old, pay-as-you-go system, and I think we could link the social contributions of the young generation through a premium to such a system, as the Select Committees have suggested.

It will be very difficult to come up with a solution for social care. It may take consensus, or it may take a future Government with a large majority being pretty tough and disciplined. It will take one or the other, not what we have at the moment. However, we can make a start, and we have to be open and transparent about the fact that there is no easy option, but there can be an option through which we get much better care for the next generation.

3.48 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The focus of my speech will be the stark reality that adult social care faces today. I doubt anyone here—actually, I am absolutely sure that no one here—would argue that adult social care is not an incredibly important issue. Many of the most vulnerable people in our society rely on social care to provide them with dignity and a life that is not just a bare existence, but one worth living. Indeed, many of our vulnerable people look forward to their only visitor of the day being from the social care or health services.

It pains me to assert that social care in this country is failing, but up and down the United Kingdom, the actions of Conservative-led Governments since 2010—I will speak a little bit about that later—have left our social care provision tending to a state of disrepair. If action is not taken, that could lead to a collapse in social care provision. The Government must recognise that the demographics of our nation have changed and continue to change, and as we make advancements in medicine people in our nation are living longer.

The National Audit Office estimates that between 2010-11 and 2016-17 the number of people aged 65 and over in need of care increased by 14%. Indeed, that demographic shift can be seen in my constituency, where the percentage of over 65s will more than double in four years, between 2017 and 2021. That is in addition to the increase in the number of people with learning difficulties and dementia.

That pressure is being admirably handled by the men and women who work in our care industry. However, that workforce are low paid, with sick pay and pensions not even being universally delivered. Is it any wonder that the industry has a turnover rate of almost 34%? For those who stay in the workforce, there is a severe lack of training and development, in large part due to a frankly unacceptable lack of investment, which is laid bare when compared with the equivalent spending in the NHS. The lack of investment in and pay for our care professionals has left a chasm in social care staffing. The Care Quality Commission report, "The state of health care and adult social care in England", highlights an adult social care vacancy rate of 15%. That means that 110,000 nurses, health professionals and social workers are not in place to do the severely needed work.

Unpaid carers provide an estimated £132 billion-worth of care each year. There has been a systemic unloading of responsibility by central Government on to local

authorities. Legislation such as the Care Act 2014 has increased local authorities' responsibilities in areas such as deprivation of liberty safeguards, the independent living fund and transformed care services, to name a few, without the funding necessary to deliver them.

The situation is further exacerbated by the continued delay of the Green Paper on the future of adult social care funding, following the proposals and recommendations of the Dilnot report. Until it is introduced, the future funding arrangements remain unclear. Despite that, my local care providers continue to deliver outstanding adult social care, with St Helens Cares receiving the *Municipal Journal* award, and Kershaw day centre winning the Dementia Care Matters award. Imagine what they could do if they actually received the funding they require. St Helens Cares truly integrates social care and health; it works with one pack of records and everything is integrated in one building. People remain at home and go to hospital only when they absolutely need to. It is a joy to see and we can prove—we have the evidence—that in just a few months that approach has reduced by 7.5% the number of people going into hospital.

My final point, which has been a common theme throughout my speech—indeed, it has been raised by many others—relates to funding. Since 2010 local authorities have experienced real-terms decreases in their core grant from central Government, which in turn has led to expenditure on adult social care falling by almost £1 billion between 2010-11 and 2016-17 and onwards. That has forced local authorities to choose between delivering either their social care responsibilities or their other commitments, as outlined by the “Long-term funding of adult social care” report.

I am sure that the Government will retort that they have made commitments to increase adult social care funding, such as the short-term funding measures of the additional £9.4 million between 2016 and 2020. However, as the Local Government Association told the report inquiry, those mechanisms have a number of limitations. They also fail to deal with the short-term issues facing adult social care, let alone the long-term issues.

The better care fund provided just over £13 million between 2011-12 and 2019-20. That is not to be sniffed at, but it is not enough to cover demand as a result of demographic shifts. To put it simply, the additional funding provided by the Government is like a sticking plaster on a gaping wound. It will not stop the bleeding and it will not help it to heal.

There has been a 1.4% decrease in nursing homes, and 32% of directors of adult social care saw homecare providers close or stop trading just six months before the “State Of Adult Social Care Services” report was published by the Care Quality Commission. The number of people receiving publicly funded care fell by 400,000 from 2009-10 to 2016-17. It is estimated that 1.2 million older people may now have unmet care needs—this has had a knock-on effect for the NHS, although in some places it has not been as hard as in others because, quite frankly, working together does work—leading to a delay in transfers of care out of hospitals and an increase in admissions as the lack of adequate care can lead to health complications. The issues facing adult social care are grave. There are solutions, however.

First, I call on the Government finally to face the facts and tackle the underlying issue of adult social care

and make significant funding increases. As stated in the evidence given to the 2018 report, “Long-term funding of adult social care”:

“Before further reform of the system can be contemplated, the funding gap must be closed.”

We need to stop the uncaring austerity measures that have been forced on the country since 2010. And may I bring this to the attention of those who are not aware of it? There was a global financial crisis in 2008. It went right across the globe. It was not the Labour Government. In fact, Labour did get the economy going here before the Conservatives took office with the Liberals. So it was not Labour. In fact, that Labour Administration paid off more debt than any other previous Government on record—debt we inherited, Members might be surprised to hear, from the Conservatives.

St Helens does receive funding from the Government—short-term funding. We cannot refuse it. We want it and we need it. We have £8.3 million from the better care fund, but what is going to happen next year, in April 2020? Do we know that yet? Funding only goes up to April 2020. What will happen if £8.3 million is taken from St Helens? That is 17.5% of our total social care budget. Other councils will be suffering similar impacts, so what is going to happen to social care?

Secondly, let us follow the example of St. Helens Cares and others—Salford Together is superb. Such initiatives, however, need support. They involve, in large part, the integration of social care and health. That does help. It is certainly a much better experience for the recipients of the service, the members of the public. They do not want to go into hospital; they would much rather stay at home, with support. There are teams based in hospitals providing a single point of service, reducing pressure and providing an almost seamless transition from health care to social care. That truly is working together. We need more support to help us achieve that and sometimes that means a little bit more financial help.

The Government have renamed the Department of Health to the Department of Health and Social Care, but I fear this change in approach has been in name only. I call on the Government to link health and social care truly—not only by administration, but with regard to workers' rights, training and financing—to deliver the social care that the people of this nation need and deserve. I call on the Minister to go back to the Department, to talk to the senior people above him and to get them to truly integrate and provide the necessary finances. There is no need for austerity—certainly not for social care.

3.59 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer). She gave a very good and comprehensive speech, but I cannot say the same about the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, who gave an impassioned speech that was no doubt great for Facebook clicks but bore very little resemblance to the reality and substance of the debate today. We have a true cross-party challenge that we need to address, and he conveniently chose to ignore some of the critical points about council funding, as it is distributed across our country.

[Rachel Maclean]

Many Opposition Members spoke about Birmingham, a city that I know well. It is a great city; I have lived and worked there for many years. They were decrying the Government for their seeming neglect of spending in Birmingham. The blame for the problems in Birmingham lie firmly at the Labour administration's door. Shall we just look at the facts? In my constituency in Worcestershire, the core spending power per dwelling is £1,356, and in Birmingham, it is £2,022—nearly 50% more. Yes, this reflects the need, but we have need in my area of Redditch as well. What is that administration doing with the money? It is squandering the money on consultants and inefficient services, when it cannot even collect the rubbish on the streets. There is rubbish piling up. It is breaking its promises to the electorate. It cannot collect the bins. The strikes have cost it £12 million, which could have funded the council tax rise that it has just inflicted on its residents.

However, that is enough about Birmingham and enough about that. I want to focus on this very important issue, on which I think there is more consensus than there is political point scoring. There is no doubt that adult social care is an absolutely critical issue. As a Member of Parliament, I hear from people who have tragic stories and face very difficult choices. I am also the daughter of a dementia sufferer, who lives on her own in Cumbria. I have seen at first hand the difficulties and challenges of navigating the system to support a frail, vulnerable lady in a very isolated rural area. We all have constituents that suffer from dementia and other conditions, so we need to grapple with this issue.

It is right to say that the lack of a social care Green Paper is a missed opportunity. I am delighted to be the co-chair of the all-party group on carers, which is doing some excellent work. Carers, of course, are the unsung heroes. They provide £132 billion-worth of care across the UK. Over the next 10 years, 20 million people will start caring. We know that unpaid carers make a huge contribution in so many ways, so I gently call on the Minister to address that.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The hon. Lady is rightly raising the plight of carers, which is a subject that is very close to my heart, as it seems to be to hers. Does she also regret the lack of a national carers strategy from her Government? The last national carers strategy was produced in 2009 and there is a campaign among carers to get the Government to produce one. We do not have a Green Paper and we do not have a national carers strategy.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Lady for that point; we work together on the all-party group and we share those concerns. I was about to press the Minister for more updates on when we can see the Green Paper, because while this debate is about local authority funding, of course there is also the role of carers and joining up the role of carers in the national health service and in local authorities. Those services have to work together and that is a critical part of this debate.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachel Maclean: I am sorry—I will not, because I do not have very much time, and I have a lot to get through.

We cannot artificially separate these two pots of funding. Instead, we must link them together more holistically. The NHS long-term plan includes some welcome focuses on carers—perhaps the hon. Lady agrees they are helpful—among which I would highlight the use of innovative technology, such as smart home technology, that can, for example, monitor when a dementia sufferer does simple things such as turn on the kettle or switch on a light, and which can be linked to an app to enable someone such as a relative—like myself, for example—to see what their loved one is doing at any given time. It is great that some utility companies are developing apps that can work in this space. I welcome that. We have to get behind those efforts to join up care.

I want to highlight another aspect of the carer spectrum. Young carers are often completely hidden from view, yet they do a fantastic job supporting their loved ones, and it often has a knock-on impact on their schooling and mental health—40% of young carers suffer from mental health problems. My final point about carers is the importance of companies and employers having a proper strategy for people juggling work and care. Most carers work, or try to work—often they have to leave work—and we should consider how we can better support them to provide that care. It is great to see the Minister for Care in her place. I know she is engaged in the detail of these issues.

I turn now to my constituency and my council, Worcestershire County Council. Of course, it faces pressures, like councils up and down the country, but I applaud it for its work in managing these pressures. In meetings with me it has called for the consultation on the fairer funding review to be brought forward quickly so that it can have more certainty to plan ahead. It needs certainty by October to plan for future savings it will need to make. It has had to find savings of £22.9 million already. A positive development in our area, however, has been the work across councils to bring forward the 75% business rates retention pilot, which has resulted in up to £4.9 million more to spend on social care. This has relieved the pressures considerably. Given that the county council spends 41.8% of its net budget on adult social care, and that we have a rising population of people demanding social care, this is really important and very welcome, but it has to be a sustainable settlement that the council can build and plan on.

I turn now to the second half of the equation—it is a shame this is sometimes neglected by Opposition Members. The shadow Secretary of State talked about growing the pie. This is critical. As well as looking at where the money comes from, we as Conservatives try to think about how we can generate more money—more pie—in our local areas. For me, at the heart of that is creating thriving local areas and town centres where people want to move to and businesses want to invest, which in turn generates more revenue and more business rates and a virtuous circle for our local economy.

That is at the heart of our “Unlock Redditch” strategy. My Conservative colleagues have had one year in office in Redditch town hall. They took control this time last year, after eight years of Labour, when there was no positive vision for the future. They have taken control and set out how they will build more social housing and help to empower businesses and the local community to build a thriving town we can all be proud of. It is a positive aspiration for our future and I am completely

behind the strategy. It is about having a mission and a plan for the future. That is what we have in Redditch. Let me take this opportunity to say to anyone in Redditch who may be watching the debate, "It is vital that you go out and vote Conservative in the local elections." If people vote Conservative, we can retain control of our town hall and continue the effective and careful management that has enabled our team to deliver services in the face of spending pressures and pressures on budgets. Similarly, Worcestershire County Council, in the face of some difficult decisions, has maintained essential services such as libraries and social care.

Let us put aside the hysterical political polemic that we sometimes hear from the Opposition Benches, and focus on working together. We have seen some excellent examples of that, so let us focus on it now, and grasp the opportunity to provide a great social care system in our country.

4.10 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Let me begin by putting my speech in context. Some of the wards in my constituency are among the most deprived in the country, and feature regularly in the index of multiple deprivation. Thirty per cent. of children in my constituency are growing up in poverty, and in some wards the figure is as high as 50%. My council's revenue support grant has been cut by more than 50%. Millions of pounds have been taken from Burnley, which has affected services provided by both Burnley Borough Council and Lancashire County Council.

Let me take this opportunity to thank Burnley's Labour council, which has delivered services valiantly. It has gone above and beyond, in difficult times, to grow the pie and create an environment in which businesses can grow. It has absolutely no support from central Government, yet it toils on, and my thanks go out to each and every one of its members.

Both the county council and the borough council have been faced with the unenviable task of rationing services as the budget cuts have had their impact. Cuts clearly have consequences, and the current level of cuts is touching every part of our society. We have gone beyond the superficial. Decent roads are a luxury of the past: no one expects to be able to drive a car down a road in my constituency that is not riddled with potholes. The libraries are closing. Subsidies are no longer available for bus routes to rural areas, so many of my vulnerable constituents are now isolated. However, we are taking all that on the chin: those are frills of the past. Some of my constituents are suffering daily when it comes to services as important as social care for the elderly. Many old people are sitting alone in their homes, relying on the carers who provide them with the only contact that they have with another human being in 24 hours. Cuts in care packages mean 20-minute visits, which means that there is barely enough time to prepare a hot meal and get someone out of bed who has been waiting desperately with toilet needs. That is what we have come to.

We are seeing, not surprisingly, the see-sawing of old people in and out of hospital. Inadequate social care budgets have consequences for the wider NHS. Old people languish in hospital beds. They are not bed-blocking. They do not want to be in hospital, and their families do not want them to be there. They want to be in their

own homes and to be afforded dignity in their own homes, but as a result of the cuts that is just not happening, despite the councils' best efforts.

Youth services are now virtually non-existent. It is no wonder we have seen a rise in youth crime and extra pressure on youth offending services. The services that are needed to support young people in our communities simply are not there. A women's refuge in my constituency which regularly has to turn away desperate women because it is bursting at the seams is threatened with closure, because sustainable funding cannot be guaranteed from one year to the next. It is an absolute disgrace that a service staffed by dedicated people protecting vulnerable women and their children should be under the threat of closure.

Support services for schools have been decimated. One of the saddest areas is the total lack of provision for children with special educational needs. In the first instance, they and their families wait months on end for a diagnosis that could even begin to attract some social support. When the diagnosis is achieved, the support is just not there. We have seen the very worrying trend of parents left with no choice but to home educate their children. Parents who have never sought to take on that responsibility are left with no option but to keep their children at home. That does not help the family and it does not help the children.

Those cuts are so short-sighted. Our children are the future of this country. If we invest in them and support them now, they will go on to be economically productive. Taking services away from all vulnerable people is storing up trouble not just for the local council, but for the wider economy.

The Secretary of State said that times have been hard, but who have they been hard for? They are hardest for the most vulnerable in our society: for the children with special educational needs; for the old people in need of social care packages; for lonely people isolated because the buses are not there anymore. After nine years of budget cuts, the services have been absolutely savaged. The Prime Minister tells us that austerity is over; I see no sign of that in my constituency.

There is a recent consultation from Lancashire County Council, which has to make further savings of £135 million on top of the savings I have just talked about. It is consulting on reductions in street lighting—at a time when police budgets are being cut, we are creating a burglar's paradise. It is consulting on the remodelling of health improvement services, which is actually a withdrawal of support services in the community for alcoholics seeking rehabilitation, smokers trying to quit and people in need of obesity services. That will all store up problems for the NHS. There is a proposal to increase the costs for self-funders accessing day care services by an eye-watering 15%. The council is consulting on cuts to home improvement services for the disabled and the elderly who need adaptations to be able to live independently in their own homes. It is all counterproductive and it all flies in the face of what the Government say they care about.

The council is consulting on cuts to the welfare rights service. There are proposals to remove respite breaks for parents of children with life-threatening conditions and to end the audit of child safeguarding services. The budgets for social care, fostering, adoption and the

[Julie Cooper]

youth offending team are all being cut. There are reduced budgets to support looked-after children, and so it goes on.

Government Members might choose to deny it, but this is the reality of a Conservative Government refusing to adequately fund local authorities to deliver the services that our constituents so desperately need. This cannot go on; people have had enough. I hope that people in my constituency are listening to this debate, that they appreciate the efforts of the Labour council to prioritise their needs in very difficult times, and that they remember that next Thursday.

4.18 pm

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I am very pleased to speak in this debate, because adult social care is an important issue in Fareham, where the average age of local residents is far higher than in most of the UK. Fareham has what is known as an ageing population.

First, I acknowledge the Government's commitment and progress on social care. We have seen considerable extra funding. Some £1.8 billion will be allocated for 2019-20 through the improved better care fund, which represents a 23% increase on the previous year. Also, £240 million of funding will be allocated to support adult social care services in order to reduce pressures on the NHS. For Hampshire, the additional amount for winter pressures equates to £4.7 million, and with the 3% social care precept that Hampshire levied in 2018-19 thanks to the greater flexibility provided by central Government, Hampshire has sufficient funds to meet the increased demand and pressure.

In Fareham, that translates into some excellent residential care homes, which I have had the pleasure to visit. Hawthorne Court, Gracewell, Hamble Heights, the Fernes at Titchfield and Abbeyfield are just a few examples of the frankly brilliant care provided for our elderly residents in Fareham. They are treated with dignity and compassion, and many of them are publicly funded. At Fareham Community Hospital—with which I have worked closely since my election in 2015, chairing the Fareham Community Hospital taskforce—we are seeing an expansion in GP services thanks to the collaboration of local surgeries, so that thousands of patients are able to see a GP on the day they request it. That is a massive improvement on previous years.

The charitable sector is also thriving in Fareham. I recently met representatives of Dementia Friendly Fareham and Dementia Friendly Hampshire. I know that my constituency neighbour, the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), who is sitting on the Front Bench, has also met that charity. It is doing fantastic work to raise awareness in our local community—in our shopping centre, for example, and among young people and professionals—so that we can work more effectively and understand the challenges faced by those with dementia. I, too, have taken the Dementia Friends training. We are also seeing other charities, including One Community and the Fareham Good Neighbours scheme, helping elderly local residents to access healthcare services.

Those are real, tangible reflections of increased Government funding and the commitment from local communities, as well as of real progress at national and

local levels. All this has been achieved with Hampshire, and indeed Fareham, having one of the lowest council tax rates in the country. So, despite continued pressure and demand, Hampshire County Council and Fareham Borough Council have been able to maintain some excellence in the delivery of public services through prudent financial planning.

I need to provide some context here. That £4.7 million compares with an estimated growth of at least £10 million, at the same time as Hampshire County Council needs to remove £43 million from the adult health and care department to cope with £45 million of extra costs, mainly due to buying in care from the private market. That cost has gone up partly due to pressure from the national living wage. All of that combined means that Hampshire faces serious financial challenges on the horizon, and support will be needed through the spending review.

Despite the evidence of that undeniable progress, I also need to talk about the human impact when things sadly go wrong. I have now met too many residents in Fareham who have found the continuing healthcare application system nebulous, harsh and expensive. In some cases, this has been heartbreaking. My constituent, John White, came to see me about his experience of caring for his elderly sister-in-law who was suffering with Alzheimer's disease. Funding applications were initially rejected by the West Hampshire clinical commissioning group. There was a lack of co-ordination between the CCG and Hampshire County Council, and the appeals process was severely delayed. Only after six years of trying was funding retrospectively granted. Sadly, that was too late, as Mr White's sister-in-law had by that time passed away. Mr White's case is not an isolated one. The application process is not patient-friendly, and families and carers can be treated with suspicion rather than support. I am hearing from constituents that the process and rules are designed in such a way that only a few applications are successful at the first attempt. Many people simply do not have the energy to keep fighting the system and are beaten into submission.

I fully appreciate that the difficult financial circumstances in which the Government found themselves in 2010 are ultimately the root cause of the problems we see today. I am grateful to the Minister for Care, with whom I have raised Mr White's case, and to the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), who has met Hampshire MPs and Hampshire County Council to discuss the county's funding, and I know how hard they are working to improve the system at central Government level. However, the process and the structure need urgent reform to improve co-ordination between healthcare providers and clinical commissioning groups and to improve patient experience. We need to act now, so that the Government's undeniable commitment to the elderly and vulnerable is not squandered and so that patients are rightly put at the heart of how our social care and NHS services are delivered. I have no doubt about this Government's commitment, and I know that we can do better.

4.25 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman). From listening to the speeches so far, this has been a sensible debate. Mental health and elderly care—two issues

close to my heart—have been discussed in a positive way, and I welcome the forthcoming Green Paper, particularly in how it relates to dementia care. Dementia is a ticking time bomb. We must grasp the issue because it will affect all our futures, and the funding to cope with it in a meaningful and measured way simply is not there yet.

However, I am here to talk about Hartlepool, which has been left behind like many seaside towns. There is a desperate need to improve housing, transport, business growth and job opportunities. Unfortunately, we have some of the most deprived wards in the country, with low life expectancy and fuel and food poverty. We have no fewer than nine foodbanks and, until recently, we topped the national table for the number of unemployed adults.

Following a year-long investigation into our coastal communities, the House of Lords' Regenerating Seaside Towns Committee recently concluded that places such as Hartlepool have been neglected for far too long, with money from successive Governments having been directed towards big towns and cities at their expense. The report quite rightly pointed to the negative effect that that has had on the economy of our once-thriving seaside towns and on the health, wellbeing and prospects of their people. It also concluded that, with the right investment, towns such as Hartlepool can be rejuvenated and once again become prosperous and desirable places to live and work.

I could not agree more with the Committee's findings and recommendations, and I will be pressing the Government to act upon them, but far from being the run-down, crime-ridden backwater portrayed on Channel 4's "Skint Britain", I must put it on the record that Hartlepool is a vibrant, welcoming place to which people choose to move despite the negative statistics and the town's negative portrayal by some. However, like in other coastal communities, the Labour council is struggling to maintain services despite its best efforts. In 2019-20, it faces 40% cuts across all departments and has for the first time been forced to use its reserves in order to balance the books and avoid job losses.

To be frank, the continued underfunding of councils such as Hartlepool's, the insistence that the majority of any settlement is ring-fenced for children's or social care, and the removal of the deprivation factor in calculating Government grant funding to areas with high levels of deprivation, such as Hartlepool, is driving them off a fiscal cliff. Services are at breaking point because of the constant cuts and the austerity agenda. Typically in places like Hartlepool, our elderly population is growing, with all the demands that brings from a public health and social care perspective.

Our children's services are also creaking at the seams, despite an award-winning children's services team. Council departments simply cannot cope with the growing demands on social care with stretched budgets. In Hartlepool, the rate of looked-after children is, thankfully, declining, but we have child poverty to cope with. We run holiday hunger schemes to keep our children from going hungry. We have schools that are desperately crying out for better funding to provide a good education in a safe and warm environment. We have no Sure Start centres, and youth provision has virtually gone.

Since 2010, local authority funding has been cut by £16 billion, which has clearly had a knock-on effect on services that my constituents expect and rely on. It is

not just services for the elderly and the young. Highways, parks, refuse collection, trading standards, libraries, the police and fire services are all affected by the chronic underfunding of local government, and the Government's threat to push the problem on to the council tax payer and, by default, let local councils take the blame is irresponsible.

Thanks to the efforts of our local Labour council, many services have been kept going, and the number of compulsory redundancies has been kept to a minimum, but at a time when the Lords point to the need for greater investment, the council is suffering death by a thousand cuts.

Hartlepool has created a care academy and aspires to have a centre of excellence. It is addressing respite care to free up beds in acute hospital wards and is tackling dementia care to fill a gap in the market with services run and owned by the public sector, but private sector providers, such as the owners of residential homes, are now ready to jump into that gap because we are not prepared to fund what is right under our nose. It makes me angry that innovative thinking to provide care for our citizens in their own community is not backed up by fair funding. The attacks on council funding need to stop, and fairer measures need to be introduced.

4.32 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I start by praising Chelmsford City Council, which has led the way in transforming Chelmsford into England's newest city. Last year, Chelmsford was ranked the No. 1 place to live in the east of England. We have a bustling high street full of new shops and restaurants, and we have a vibrant night life. We have just been ranked No. 1 in the country for our Pubwatch scheme, which is keeping people safe at night.

We have 13 green flag parks, and, a couple of weeks ago, one of our parks was chosen to be home to the national police dog memorial—do come and visit. The local council is working with the local police on investing in a community policing hub, which will have state-of-the-art CCTV, and they have co-invested in extra community policing that will help to support the over 300 extra police officers who have been added to Essex services.

We are building a new swimming pool, upgrading the museum and refurbishing the fantastic indoor market. We recently invested over £1 million in local charities to tackle homelessness, and we are building more than 1,000 new homes a year especially for local people. We are fighting for the infrastructure to go alongside that. As we have local government Ministers present, I give them an extra nudge to fund our much needed second railway station, which would unlock another 10,000 homes that we need.

Essex County Council does excellent work in many regards, especially children's services. It is the second largest children's services area in the whole country. Back in 2010, under the Labour Government, it was failing. It is now—since January—ranked outstanding. The investment in children's services has gone down from £148 million to £118 million, proving that when it comes to running outstanding facilities, money is not always the solution. The solution in this case was to use early intervention and targeted work, and to unlock local partnerships. I urge Members to read the Ofsted report.

[Vicky Ford]

Essex County Council is challenged. We have seen a great deal of population growth and increasing demand, particularly for social care. Adult social services make up about 45% of Essex County Council's spending. Over the next decade, we expect the number of over-80s to rise by two thirds and the number of over-90s to rise by 90%.

We need a new model for funding social services. It is simply not fair that those who win the lifetime lottery and live to be healthy, well and fit in their old age can, when they pass on, leave their assets to those they love; whereas those who become frail—especially those who suffer from dementia—and need care end up losing their assets, and they find that they cannot pass on such gifts to future generations. There have to be fairer models, and I encourage the Government to be brave in looking at different options, including those that work in other countries. I urge them to look at insurance schemes and lifetime saving schemes, and to try to find fairer ways to solve the problem.

I want to discuss dementia, because the great fact that we are living longer means that more people suffer from dementia. Some 850,000 people in the UK have dementia, and the cost of caring for them is £26 billion a year, but we know that that figure will rise. Across the world, there are 47 million people with dementia, and it is estimated that by 2050 the number will have risen to 135 million.

I am very glad that the Chair of the excellent Science and Technology Committee is in his seat. Along with a Conservative colleague, he and I spent the morning representing the Committee with the Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer's Research UK at the Dementia Research Institute, which is the world's biggest single investment in dementia research. It was a great pleasure to meet those involved, who told us about the work that is being done to improve the day-to-day life of those with dementia. The UK leads in areas such as technological aids to make living with dementia easier, and it is doing great work on changing society's view and understanding of people with dementia. We learned that 500 people a week are becoming dementia friends, which is great.

We also learned that much more can be done to understand dementia and work towards a cure. In recent years, there have been 3.4 million publications on cancer in the UK alone. By comparison, there have been just 170,000 on dementia. In other words, for every piece of research into dementia, there have been 20 on cancer, even though dementia is the cause of far more death and suffering in later years. The amount of research is increasing, and it has resulted in a much greater understanding of what causes dementia. We understand that the causes start decades before the symptoms appear. To understand what causes dementia in somebody in their 70s, we need to understand the changes that start happening in our 40s and 50s.

We also heard that the UK is leading the world in research. We were told that a third of all dementia may be preventable, provided that it can be detected early. Early intervention can be used to understand the triggers and how to prevent it. As well as looking into how we care for those who are old and frail and need support, let us keep up the research into how we prevent that need.

Norman Lamb: I share the hon. Lady's view of the excellent Select Committee on which we both serve. We had a fascinating visit. Does she agree that, from what we heard this morning, there is a case not only for increasing investment in dementia research based on transforming the lives of people who currently suffer with dementia, but for investing to save? If we are to prevent the health and care system from bankrupting itself because of this increasing prevalence, we have to act now to reduce that prevalence by finding out how we can prevent dementia in future.

Vicky Ford: I absolutely agree. We heard it described earlier as like watching a tsunami way out to sea. People are living longer, which means that the number of people suffering from dementia around the world will increase unless we get ahead of the challenge. We cannot just keep watching it; we need to get ahead of the challenge to understand the causes. There will be cures, but only if the world continues to invest in the research. As well as investing in social care and finding a new model to help to provide it, let us keep up our world-leading research into Alzheimer's and other dementia-causing diseases and make sure that the UK continues to lead on that challenge, and let the Government invest more and get the rest of the world to do so, too.

4.41 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), particularly after listening to her account of what can be done to help to tackle dementia.

Like a number of other Members, I have had the honour of being a councillor: for 15 years, I served the people of Battle Hill ward, where I live, in North Tyneside. To this day, I am proud of everything that Labour councillors have achieved since North Tyneside came into being in 1974. Labour has been in power there for the majority of that time. I remain an ardent supporter of the council under our elected mayor, Norma Redfearn, and pay great attention to the council's finances, particularly as my husband Ray has served as the cabinet member for finance over the past six years.

Like councils up and down the country, North Tyneside has struggled over the past nine years, losing £120 million because of Government cuts. This year, the council has taken a £3.5 million cut, and more than £27 million in cuts are due over the next four years. Because of the cuts, North Tyneside's cabinet has been put in a difficult position with regard to preparing a balanced budget while bringing together the impact of reduced funding over successive years, as well as the additional unfunded burdens and demand-led pressures the council has faced.

A major problem has been the Government's assumption that councils will make the Government's suggested increase in council tax, because that suggested increase is taken into account when the council's baseline funding needs are assessed. Although the Government see bringing forward these council tax-raising powers in the settlement as a way of recognising the calls for urgent help for councils to tackle some of the immediate social care pressures they face, in practice it simply shifts the burden of tackling a national crisis on to councils, and ultimately on to their residents. Sadly, North Tyneside, with this burden placed on it, has, with great reluctance, increased council tax in this year's budget by 2.99%. That means

£30 extra a year for band A and more than £45 extra for band D, which is quite a sum for people who are already struggling to make ends meet.

Despite the rise in council tax, North Tyneside Labour Council continues to face the challenge of maximising the use of available resources to ensure that the borough continues to grow through investment and that essential services such as social care continue to be delivered. Achieving that balance becomes more and more difficult every year, and the council can see no easing of the relentless pressure to secure efficiencies in the current financial environment.

However, despite those challenges, North Tyneside continues to focus on achieving the overall policy objective shaped in “Our North Tyneside Plan”, which was put together by a mayor who listens to the people. The council is determined to continue to find a way to improve the lives of residents by making the council work smarter, putting people at the centre of what it does and ensuring that it maximises the way it uses public money to achieve residents’ priorities, which include delivering economic prosperity and good social care—priorities that came up time and again among our residents.

Like many other councils, North Tyneside has great staff, who are dedicated and work under extreme pressure. I am grateful for all that they do to help North Tyneside survive in the face of such stringent Government cuts. I ask the Minister when the Government will realise that councils across the country have reached breaking point. When will the Government restore funding to a level that enables our hard-working councillors and council staff to deliver the best possible services not just to the people of North Tyneside, but to the whole country as it is what the people expect and deserve?

Finally, I wish all the candidates standing in next week’s elections the best of luck, but I wish the very best of luck to all our Labour candidates, especially the one in North Tyneside.

4.46 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I wish to focus my contribution on the impact of local government cuts on tackling youth violence. We know that early intervention and prevention is key as is a public health approach, and I will come back to those points later on in my contribution.

Toby Perkins: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend, but I note that there is not a single Member of Parliament on the Government Benches. I just wondered whether the fire alarm had gone off and none of us on the Labour Benches had heard it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. Of course he knows that the occupation of the Benches is not a matter for the Chair. *[Interruption.]* Indeed, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who is temporarily not in his place, is making it clear that he is in the Chamber. So, too, is the Minister, the Whip, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), and the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. None the less, I take the hon. Gentleman’s point. I say to him and to the Chamber that I have been a little more lenient than normal this afternoon about people—on both sides of

the Chamber—coming in and out of the Chamber and being absent for rather longer than I would normally find acceptable. This is a particularly busy week. There are many delegated legislation Committees and Select Committees sitting because the House did not sit on Easter Monday, so I have been a little more lenient than normal. That is one reason why there are fewer people in the Chamber than there might otherwise have been, but no one would like to give the impression to anybody watching that this has been anything other than a well-attended debate, with people making serious speeches. Every single speech that I have heard has been made by Members of this place who take their duties in their constituencies very seriously.

Vicky Foxcroft: My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) made a good point. This is an incredibly important debate, as we are discussing cuts to local authorities. I would also say that my contribution, in which I will talk about the impact of cuts on youth violence, is extremely important.

After the Prime Minister’s recent summit on serious violence, about which this Chamber is still awaiting a statement, the Government launched the “Consultation on a new legal duty to support a multi-agency approach to preventing and tackling serious violence.” Many of the words in this document are to be welcomed. However, local authorities are responsible for many of the services that the Government see as key to this multi-agency approach, and cuts of nearly £16 billion to local government since 2010—£165 million in Lewisham—have left our public services at breaking point, so hon. Members can see why so many are sceptical about the Government’s multi-agency strategy. There is a lot of promising language in the consultation, with mentions of following the evidence, focusing on the long term, and working “with and for communities”. It includes examples of best practice and advice from the World Health Organisation on violence reduction.

Violence is not inevitable; with the right approach, I truly believe that it is preventable. Obviously, we need Departments to work together to share data and generate long-term solutions. We hear all the time that this is not just an issue that the police can tackle alone. We need a strategy that brings together schools, social services, housing, police, youth services and the voluntary sector—one that follows the evidence and brings communities with us. Indeed, we need a public health approach. However, teachers and frontline NHS workers have expressed concerns about the proposed legal duty, and with fair reason. Over the last nine years, austerity has taken its toll. The NHS is suffering the biggest funding squeeze in its history. Schools budgets have been cut by £1.7 billion since 2015. Adding yet another responsibility on to the shoulders of our brilliant but overstretched teachers and NHS staff without further resources is unacceptable.

If hon. Members look at my own Borough of Lewisham, they will see the immense pressure that the council is already under. Since 2010, Lewisham has suffered cuts to its budget of more than 60%. Local schools have lost out on over £25 million of funding since 2015 and 14 schools are facing a shortfall in their budget as a result. Food bank use has been rising year on year. Last year, 7,000 families in Lewisham visited a food bank—yes, 7,000 families. Lewisham is one of the most deprived local authorities in England and one of the 20 local

[Vicky Foxcroft]

authorities with the highest levels of child poverty. At the same time, the local population has risen by 10% since the last census, adding yet more pressure to the council's dwindling budgets. That is the context we are talking about, with poverty rising, complex social needs rising and the local population rising, alongside unsustainable cuts to local services.

The Government's public health approach says that we should be bringing together law enforcement, education, health, housing and youth services. Councils want to do that, but they need the funding to achieve it. Youth services in the Borough of Lewisham have been cut by more than a third since 2012. As a result, centres are struggling to remain open and the year-round provision that we had in the past is just no longer possible. Our police are working hard with fewer resources, often putting themselves in danger to ensure that they keep us safe. Lewisham, Greenwich and Bexley police forces in south-east London have recently had to merge, resulting in the loss of 100 police officers. At the same time, we have lost several local police stations and more are at risk of closing soon. I know the police would prefer that that was not happening.

Councils such as Lewisham have had to be creative so that it can still deliver for local residents. Put simply, we previously had a service with 45 local community wardens and now there are 30 seeking to do the same job. That is on top of a reduction in the number of police community support officers. In the past, we had more than six community support officers per ward; they knew the local area well and had the capacity to build relationships with the community. That is no longer possible. Most of our wards are left with just one community officer, and that is a picture we are seeing across London.

There is a familiar story in our schools. On average, Lewisham schools will suffer an estimated loss of almost £26 million between 2015 and 2020, equivalent to £319 per pupil, and most teachers are now teaching classes of well over 30 pupils. School exclusions are rising, too—speaking of which, when will we get the Timpson review of school exclusions? I have asked that several times in this Chamber.

Also notably absent from the Government's consultation is early years—a worrying, but not surprising, oversight. Sure Start centres have been cut across the country, and Lewisham is no exception. In 2010, the borough had 19 children's centres; only five are left today. Early years support is crucial to a public health approach. How else can we implement early intervention? Is it not time that the Government provided maintained nursery schools, with the sustainable funding they need to keep their doors open?

I wanted to end on a more positive note. We in Lewisham are lucky to have a Labour council led by a brilliant mayor. In spite of all the cuts, Lewisham Labour is committed to implementing a public health approach to tackle violence. It plans to lead a truly community-led approach, and has already started by consulting Lewisham's vibrant community groups and voluntary organisations. Our local government has a huge part to play in tackling violence and it is reassuring that the Government have recognised that. The Government are using all the right language, but now is the time to follow through with the necessary funding that our services have been without for far too long.

We talk about following the evidence, but where is the evidence that a programme run in a school teaching kids, "Don't carry a knife, because you won't be safe," actually works? If we want to talk about true evidence, we have to build our young children's resilience; we have to teach them to realise how fantastic they will be in the future and give them the skills to do that. That means investing in Sure Start early childhood centres, in our schools and in youth work. Our young people deserve that—they deserve the futures we all want for them. I urge the Government to fund local authorities properly, so that they can deliver.

4.57 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): As we have heard in the accounts given by many of my hon. Friends today, for many communities in this country local government funding is a matter of life and death—a matter of keeping vital services open and making sure that the most vulnerable people in our society are given the protection and support they need to survive. That is the scale of the crisis afflicting our local authorities—a crisis that we know hits the poorest the hardest.

Nine of the 10 most deprived councils in England face cuts that are higher than the national average. All nine are Labour controlled. Seven of the 10 areas facing the smallest cuts to spending power per household are Conservative controlled. Is it not telling that after nine years of savage cuts to local government, fraying the very fabric of our society, the Tory party is campaigning in the upcoming local elections on its record on road maintenance? The Conservatives boast proudly of "A few less bumps in the road". Consider that for a moment. Local authorities are housing 79,000 homeless families in temporary accommodation, including more than 120,000 children; last year saw the biggest annual increase in children in care since 2010, and councils start 500 child protection investigations every day—but the Tories want to talk about fixing potholes.

We have now seen almost a decade of deprivation engineered by Tories in Westminster. The Conservative party proudly talks of its record on fixing bumps in the road while our communities are starved of spending and our services are cut to the bone. What an insult to the dementia patient who cannot access adequate social care, to the family who cannot find themselves a home or to the schoolchildren sent home early for a lack of funding. Does that not sum up the warped priorities of this failing Government?

I commend the Labour councils across the country, which are doing their best to stand up for our communities in the teeth of savage Tory cuts. Voters face a blunt choice in the upcoming local elections between those who want to destroy our communities and those who want to rebuild them for the many.

5 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): First, I would like to pay tribute to the fabulous work of the council staff in my area and the local councillors of the Conservative party, independents and others, who work so hard to deliver excellent services for our community.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) made the point that the previous Labour Government moved funding from shire constituencies

to metropolitan areas. As a resident of both South Kesteven and Westminster, I thought it would be useful to illustrate the difference between the two. In South Kesteven District Council area, the average weekly gross wage is £453.20, and the council tax for a band D property is £1,589.38 a year. In Westminster, where I am during the week, the average weekly wage is £786.10, and band D council tax is £710.50. This means that the average person in Westminster is earning more than £300 a week more but pays £879 less in council tax for their local services.

Despite the challenges to funding and the fact that if Lincolnshire County Council were funded the same per capita as the average council in the country, it would receive £116 million more than its current budget of roughly £500 million, it has been able to do some very innovative things with its funding. We have discussed the environment a lot this week. South Kesteven District Council introduced “The Big Clean” initiative last year, which visits each village of the district to remove fly-tipping, clean signs, remove undergrowth and do other things suggested by the local residents to improve the environment in which people live and ensure that they can take pride in their surroundings.

Gravity Fields festival, which has been running since 2012, is an innovation of our local council. This goes beyond delivering the basic services; this is the best in the country. It is a festival of art and science inspired by Sir Isaac Newton, who was from Grantham and went to the local school. The festival not only provides the people of Grantham with information on art and science and very interesting experiences, but it raises £1 million for the local area through visitors staying there and spending their money on food and drink and the like. This is a Conservative council doing its best to deliver really innovative stuff, despite having a stretched budget.

North Kesteven District Council, which covers the other part of my constituency, is similar. It has looked carefully at the challenge of being good to the environment while providing the social housing that is required. It has won awards for building curved homes and passive houses, delivering the next generation of social housing in an environmentally sustainable way. It is not only providing basic services but going above and beyond, to provide excellent services. Lincolnshire County Council receives lower than the average per capita funding, as I have said, but it is still providing our children and young people with what Ofsted describes as “strong and effective” services for those with special educational needs and disabilities.

The ageing population presents one of our nation’s most profound challenges. It raises critical questions about how, as a society, we enable all adults to live well in later life and how we deliver sustainable public services to support them to do so. There will be 2 million more people aged over 75 in the next 10 years, and many of those will be managing long-term conditions. It is vital to make sure that local councils are supported to provide for elderly citizens so that they can age with dignity. That is why I am glad this Conservative Government have invested in social care, with a 23% increase in the improved better care fund to £1.8 billion, an additional £410 million through the social care support grant and £10 billion for adult social care being provided to councils by 2020.

I really welcome the additional resources that have been provided for social care by this Government, but as a Member representing a rural constituency it is important for me to emphasise that an extra £1 for social care in London will go further than an extra £1 in Lincolnshire. Rural areas face higher costs for the delivery of public services than urban areas. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) says from a sedentary position, “That’s not true”, but if one is visiting an elderly person in their home and then travelling on to visit the next elderly person in their home, there is of course a gap.

Andrew Gwynne: I am not saying that is not true; the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s own report says it is not true.

Dr Johnson: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but it seems to me that rural shires often have Conservative-led local authorities that provide their services more efficiently. In practice, if we ask a carer to go out to visit three elderly people in a morning, for example, and those houses are very close together, as they may be in Westminster, they will be able to visit, spend longer with them and have lower travel costs than they would if they had to visit three houses in my constituency, which covers 433 square miles and is all within the same county council.

As I was saying, when it comes to social care, this problem is in large part due to both the demographics and the distances involved. As I have said, my constituency spans 433 square miles and has a low population density, and there are longer travel distances for staff to deliver care. Furthermore, Sleaford and North Hykeham, as a rural area, has a higher number of older residents. Those older residents have worked hard their entire lives and now need support from our public services to ensure that they can maintain a higher quality of life.

However, this is not all about funding. Actually, I think it is sad that so much of the debate has focused almost entirely on who is going to provide the most money, while only a little bit has been on how to pay for it, and not so much on innovation and quality of care. The important thing is not shouting about who can spend the most money, but who can deliver the best outcomes and provide the best care for people, because that is surely what everybody on both sides of the House wants.

Last year, there was the launch of the National Centre for Rural Health and Care in Lincolnshire. This is a grouping of the NHS, the University of Lincoln, Health Education England, Public Health England and the East Midlands Academic Health Science Network. This pioneering group will look at improving how we deliver care in local areas.

There is also the social care and digital innovation programme, which is run by NHS Digital. This gives money for local projects, so somebody with a local project that they think could improve care for residents, if they had a little bit of start-up funding to test it, could receive money to support the design and trial of digital solutions to improve care and provide value for money. Previous projects include an exoskeleton device in the Isle of Wight to give people greater independence, and the provision of Amazon Alexa in Hampshire to help people to maintain independent living.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

There are other projects, too. In Cornwall, Peninsula Community Health Services is looking at how to prevent pressure sores. We know that 500,000 people in this country develop a pressure sore every year. These are excruciatingly painful, can become infected and, in the worst cases, can lead to such a serious infection that the patient dies. The continuous pressure monitoring technology devices will be able to help people identify hotspots even before the skin damage occurs and prevent that from happening. That is an investment in something that, overall, will not just improve patient care but save money.

The Leeds Care Record looks at how information can be shared—data protection means that in some cases it is difficult to share information held by hospitals and GPs—and how referrals are made. When I first qualified as a doctor, all the letters were dictated and signed, but now they are typed and sent electronically. Cumbria, for example, saves £400,000 a year by sending referrals electronically. That also saves time, which means not only saving money but improving the efficiency of the service delivered to patients.

I am glad that the Government acknowledge the need to change the outdated funding formula, which has failed accurately to recognise the discrepancy in need between urban and rural areas; that need is often hidden in rural areas. As Ministers review the consultation findings, I hope they will ensure that the new funding formula adequately takes that into account.

Finally, as a member of the Conservative party, which has long been the best custodian of the public finances, I say that it is imperative that money is spent both wisely and efficiently. The issue of social care goes much wider than just funding. Despite the challenges facing local councils, I have seen at first hand how the brilliant work by North and South Kesteven District Councils and Lincolnshire County Council can support the people in my constituency and make our resources go as far as possible.

5.11 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I will address most of my remarks to the issue of social care and the challenge we face, but first I want to highlight a real concern that other hon. Members have also expressed. The funding constraints on local government have had a very big impact on preventive services that are designed to stop extra costs being incurred at a later stage through a failure of the system.

I will give one or two examples. The Select Committee on Science and Technology recently conducted an inquiry into the impact of adversity in childhood, looking in particular at trauma, abuse or neglect in early years. We know that if we intervene early and follow the evidence of what is effective in stopping trauma becoming entrenched, we can not only transform lives but save a fortune further down the track.

The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) said something about the Conservative party being the custodians of careful finance, but we are seeing significant reductions in investment in preventive services, which end up costing the state a fortune further down the line. Too often, children who experience trauma, abuse or neglect in early years and who do not get the

support they need end up being excluded from school, and the track through to the criminal justice system is all too real. Educational attainment is, therefore, often lower than it should be, and worklessness often follows. The disinvestment over the past few years in those preventive early years services, supporting parents and so on, has been a very stupid thing to do, because it will cost the state far more in years to come.

When the Chancellor launched the Budget a few weeks ago, it was encouraging to hear him say that he was willing to invest in early intervention where there was evidence of its effectiveness. Well, there is evidence of its effectiveness, so the Chancellor needs to make that investment.

Toby Perkins: I have huge respect for the right hon. Gentleman's knowledge in this area, but he is talking about overall local government spending cuts and he was, of course, a part of the first five years of this Government. The greatest austerity and local government cuts were made under a Liberal Democrat and Tory coalition, so does he regret his part in the huge cuts made to local government between 2010 and 2015?

Norman Lamb: If we are honest, every Government have some responsibility. The reductions started before 2010. I absolutely accept—[*Interruption.*] Let me address this point; I am trying to be straight with the hon. Gentleman. I think mistakes were made by the coalition Government in terms of the hit local government took during that period. The contrast between the support for the NHS by increasing investment in real terms and the cut to social care does not make sense, but that is what happened. I recognise that. It was above my pay grade, but I do not think it was the right decision to make. I hope that that is of some help to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): My right hon. Friend makes some really important points about the first 1,000 days of life, but equally there are similar arguments relating to the end of life. For example, too many people who need social care end up in a much more expensive place at the end of their life—in a hospital setting, where they do not want to be—for the want of the right investment in social care. Does he agree that we should apply the principle of investing to save across the whole of life?

Norman Lamb: I absolutely recognise and accept that point.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) intervened to challenge the point about spending under the coalition Government. There was a crisis in public finances in 2010 which did have to be addressed, but I do accept that the balance between social care and the NHS was not optimal. I also want to address other areas where the underinvestment or disinvestment in preventive services has borne a heavy cost.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who has done very good work on youth violence—I have been part of the commission looking at that—made the point that many of the preventive services that are there, particularly during teenage years, to stop the risk of young people slipping into gang violence have been stripped away in many of the poorest communities. Again, the impact of that has, at least in

part—it is very hard to judge cause and effect—been an increase in violence on our streets at the awful and dreadful cost to many of those affected by it.

I want to turn specifically to social care. It is worth reflecting on why social care is so important. It is there to give people the chance of a happy life and a good life, as far as they are able to enjoy that if they are struggling with a range of conditions. It is there to help people to remain independent in old age, to support people so that they do not end up needing the NHS, with an enormous impact on their wellbeing. One of the problems we face is that unless you or a family member experiences the need for social care, it is hidden from view. Very many families across our country simply do not see the impact of the underfunding of social care today, but it is very real. There are over 1 million older people who are not getting the care they need. As Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, has pointed out on many occasions, if people do not get social care support, that has an impact on the NHS. The funding settlement for the NHS simply will not work unless we address the under-resourcing of social care.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman knows more about social care than anyone else in this House—I pay him that compliment. Does he accept that one of the most unfair issues is where local authorities have moved people with learning disabilities out to cheaper parts of the country—Gloucestershire being a classic case—and their care needs get worse over time? The local authority that moved them out says, “It’s not our problem; it is the problem of the local authority to which they have moved”. Does he agree that that is why we need a national care service?

Norman Lamb: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the issue of how we care for people of a younger age who have care needs, particularly those with learning disabilities and autism. What happens too often is that those people end up in institutions when they do not need to be there, often away from home and at enormous cost to the public purse. Again, the evidence from around the country shows that where this is done well and where families are supported to keep someone at home, helping them through crises, we not only reduce the cost to the public purse but have a massive impact on their wellbeing. He is also right to highlight the fact that we end up with awful disputes about who is responsible for payment as people are shunted around the country in a way that, in my view, fundamentally breaches their human rights.

Barbara Keeley: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman is talking about this topic. It is absolutely vital, but does he regret the extent to which the Government now seem to have abandoned the transforming care programme? There seems to be no future for it. From the time when he was a Minister, there was a programme to deal with the issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) raised, but there now appears to be an abandonment of targets and an abandonment of the future of that programme, and certainly no funding to make it work.

Norman Lamb: I am deeply concerned about the future—or lack of a future—of the transforming care programme. One of the problems is that it is often NHS England that is funding care in an institution, and when

a local authority is under financial stress, there is not much of an incentive to take that person out of the institution and make them the responsibility of the local authority. There has to be a way of funding the building of infrastructure to support people in the community. That is what has failed to happen so far.

This is not a static issue that we face. There is growing pressure. We are all living longer, often with chronic conditions that in the past used to kill us. That is a great triumph of man and womankind, but there is a cost attached, yet we have no mechanism to address the increasing funding needs of social care and, in particular, dementia.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), one of the valued members of the Science and Technology Committee, made the point that the cost to society of dementia is about £26 billion every year, but that is going to rise dramatically. Whatever we say about spending money efficiently—I completely agree about the need to spend money efficiently and to innovate and do things in a more effective way—the dramatic rise in demand inevitably means that we will have to spend more as a society on supporting people with dementia and on research to find cures for dementia.

Tom Brake: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Norman Lamb: I will briefly, but I am having glowers directed at me by you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Tom Brake: Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the ways of supporting people who need care, such as dementia sufferers, is to support their carers, and that there is a very important role for organisations such as the Sutton Carers Centre in providing support to the network of carers who support people with dementia and others with long-term conditions?

Norman Lamb: I very much agree, and those organisations do incredibly important work.

I want to mention the Care Act 2014, which I was responsible for taking through Parliament. I think it was widely regarded as good legislation, but I fear that it has been undermined by a failure to commit sufficient resources to really realise the transformation that it was designed to achieve in personalising care and putting the individual at the heart of everything that local authorities do. In particular, we legislated for a cap on care costs in that Act, but as soon as the Conservatives got rid of the Lib Dems from the coalition, that commitment was abandoned. All the work that we did in consulting and legislating for a cap on care costs to protect people from catastrophic cost has been lost. Of course, we know that in the 2017 general election the Prime Minister paid dearly for that politically, because the replacement proposal was sorely lacking and amounted, in many people’s eyes, to a tax on dementia.

I am conscious that you want me to shut up very soon, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I want to say something very briefly on future funding. It seems to me that if we are to achieve a sustainable settlement, we have to work on a cross-party basis and the Government have to embrace that. The motion still prompts the question of where the money is going to come from—it does not answer that question.

[Norman Lamb]

There are a range of solutions. My party and I have proposed a dedicated health and care tax that would appear on people's pay packets so that everyone could see where the money was going, and which would be informed by an independent assessment, perhaps every five years, of how much the health and care system needed. It would take the politics out of the calculation of how much the care system needs. Then the parties could argue about whether they were prepared to meet those needs through an increase in that dedicated tax.

If we are to solve this, it will require political will. There has been a failure of the political class, not just in the last few years but ever since the late '90s, when a royal commission established by the then Labour Government came up with proposals that were never implemented. It has been kicked in and out of the long grass ever since, and we are still waiting for a solution. It is time we found one, because we are letting down too many people in our country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. A lot of people still wish to speak, and we are working on the basis of 10 minutes for each speaker. If Members go over that, it will affect people lower down the order, so please can we try to help each other?

5.25 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who, as we all know, has great knowledge in this area. I am pleased he acknowledged in response to my intervention that the Government the Liberal Democrats were part of got the balance wrong in local government funding. I am very conscious of that fact, having spent a lot of time talking about local government elections in the last week or so back in Chesterfield, where it is hard to find a Liberal Democrat who will own up to the Government their party was a part of. They seem to have disowned their record entirely.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) made the point that in this time of austerity the worst hit area of government has been local government. It has been utter cowardice for the Government to say, "There are going to be huge cuts, but we're not going to decide where they'll fall, because we're going to pass on that decision to local authority leaders. It will be for them to decide whether to shut a library, close a park or stop investing in roads. We're going to outsource the pain". I think of the many people who first became councillors after the 2015 elections, or even the 2013 elections. They were so excited to be councillors, but at their very first council meeting they were faced with the decision of what to shut. That has been the reality for many local authorities.

It is absolutely right that the motion tabled by my hon. Friends should focus on that unfairness. I have referred previously to the fact that Chesterfield has had a 43.2% cut, whereas the Secretary of State's local authority has had a cut of just 12%. The right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) spoke up for that, saying the problem with the Labour Government was that they sent all the money to the poor areas. I am

proud that a Labour Government made those decisions and recognised the role that local authorities can play in supporting the most deprived in our society.

As I said, I have been in Chesterfield talking about the local elections. I am proud of the record of the local authority in Chesterfield. It has recognised that in a time of austerity and unfair cuts from central Government it has had to make innovative choices to enable us to provide better services that cost less. It invested in a new leisure centre and found that the amount by which it had to subsidise it fell from £1.5 million—the figure in every year under the Liberal Democrats—to only £300,000 a year, as more people were using it because it had better facilities. Similarly, the council invested in our cultural facilities, meaning the theatre and concert venue saw a 60% reduction in the amount by which it had to be subsidised, since it was getting more punters through the door because it had better facilities.

We have fewer empty shop units than most other local authority areas of a similar sort. The council has done very innovative things, such as bringing a big wheel into the centre of Chesterfield, which massively increased the number of people visiting the town centre, and it has an innovative record on tackling homelessness. There was an excellent remembrance display to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the 1914-18 conflict, featuring poppy cascades not just from the town hall but from a variety of retail units. The council has recognised that it is sometimes necessary for local authorities to invest in order to save money and to be innovative if people are to be proud of them, but at the same time it has managed to maintain the lowest level of council tax in Derbyshire.

We know that Labour councils cost you less. The average cost per household in Labour council areas is £351 less than the average in Tory areas. The authorities that have been most likely to go bust are Tory authorities in, for instance, Northamptonshire and Surrey. Not only does Labour run its councils better than the Tories, but its councils cost less and innovate more. I am very proud of the record that I will be going out to defend.

I want to say something about social care, because I know a great deal about it. I spent a very tough year of my career as care manager of a private provider of domiciliary care for Sheffield City Council. One aspect of social care that is missing from the whole debate is the fact that it is set up as an industry rather than a service. The vast majority of domestic care providers are private sector businesses, and the vast majority of care homes are run by the private sector. The No. 1 priority of the private sector is to make a profit, and we should not be surprised that if we involve private sector companies in care homes, they will try to make a profit out of them. That, ultimately, is what companies exist for.

Councils often involve the private sector because they are trying to save money, and they recognise that the terms and conditions on which local authority staff will work will be more generous than those in the private sector. That is one of the knock-on consequences of the overall spending pressure on councils. The relationship between councils and their providers is very important. Far too often, councils outsource responsibility for these services, signing up to contracts that anyone who studies them must know are unsustainable. They must have some responsibility for the decisions that they make.

As one who has worked with carers, I take my hat off to those who work in the care industry. I know that they are among the most dedicated and professional of people, often working in incredibly difficult circumstances for an absolute pittance. I know that whether they wear a uniform with a local authority badge on it or work for a private company, they have a real commitment to the people for whom they provide care. However, we are seeing an industry in crisis. More than 100 care homes have gone bust in the last two years or so, and dozens of domestic care providers are going bust as well. In 2018 Allied Healthcare, the company for which I used to work, was days away from bankruptcy. Every time a care home goes bust, the onus falls on the local authority again.

The Government need to understand that given the scale of cuts that we have seen over the last nine years, with a single year's uplift and the ring-fencing of the small amount of £2.5 billion—it is not actually a small amount, but it is inadequate in comparison with the cuts of previous years—they cannot, as the Minister did earlier, wash their hands of the fact that the industry is in crisis and businesses are going bust. That means 15-minute appointments. It means dementia patients seeing a different carer every day, although consistency of care is so important. It means a decline in the service that they receive. It means families seeing that their relatives are deeply troubled by the inconsistency of the services that they are receiving. It means local authorities saying that they will not pay for travelling time, and that responsibility falling back on to the companies.

The courts have recently decided that those who provide sleepovers should be paid the national minimum wage. Many care companies did not previously pay it. I support that decision, but the corollary must be the Government's recognition that while local authorities were previously tendering on the basis that those who slept on the job could be paid on a different basis, it has now been retrospectively decided that authorities must pay private providers. Money must now come from central Government to fund that, because businesses will continue to go bust and the services on which people rely will continue to be diminished.

All the cuts to care have consequences. When care services are not available, people turn up in A&E. Some 20% of the people in A&E should be in a hospital bed but cannot get admitted. At the same time, 20% of hospital beds are filled by people who cannot get out because there is no care package waiting for them. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) spoke about the impact of cuts to children's social care falling on children with special needs and on schools. Things like the failure to diagnose autism have a knock-on impact right across the school and other areas. All these services are connected; we cannot look at social care and local government finances in isolation.

I met the managing director of One to One, a company in my constituency that provides excellent care services to many local authorities, who told me about the knock-on consequences and the impact that local authority funding cuts are having on its ability to get paid. The company is often owed tens of thousands of pounds by local authorities that are struggling to manage their administration.

The industry is in crisis and local government is in crisis. The Government have two choices: they either step up to the mark and convince us that they are serious about the social care funding crisis, or they

continue in the way they are going, in which case everyone will realise that this is something that lands at their door.

5.36 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins).

Let me start by highlighting to those who are watching the debate across the nation that we are debating local council funding because it is an Opposition day. The Conservative party has continued to delay, distract and sometimes even destroy any meaningful conversation on Brexit, as a result jeopardising the discussions on other issues that are faced by people across our communities and constituencies. I therefore thank the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for the leadership he has shown on this matter.

As we have heard, by 2020 local authorities will have faced a reduction in core funding from the Government of nearly £16 billion since 2010. That means that councils will have lost 60p out of every £1 the Government used to provide for spending on local services. In Bradford over the past 10 years, we have seen huge cuts to our local council funding. In 2010, we received more than £500 million. In 2019, we received just under £400 million. On average, that is a loss of £750 per household across the city of Bradford.

Conservative Members may want to turn the debate into a conversation about spending formulas, but the reality on the ground is clear. We do not need statistics to tell us about the growing levels of deprivation in our constituencies. The stark reality can be seen in the lack of properly funded services, the non-existent youth services, the reduction in bobbies on the beat, the oversized classes and overcrowded classrooms, and the decline in living standards faced by the poorest in our communities.

I ask the Minister: what do I say to the young people in my constituency? It has one of the youngest populations in Europe, with 30% of Bradfordians being under the age of 20, yet it has among the highest levels of youth unemployment. How do I tell the younger generation that they do not have access to the youth services that were there before because we now have a Tory Government in power? How do I explain to them that because they have a Labour council, the Government disproportionately play politics with their life opportunities?

The facts speak for themselves: Bradford appears in the list of the top five councils to receive the biggest cuts to their total spending power over the past 10 years. Why is it that eight of the 10 councils that have received the largest cuts are under Labour control, while eight of the 10 councils that have received the smallest cuts are under Conservative control? I say today loudly and clearly: this Government have played party politics with Brexit, but we will not sit by silently as they play politics with the lives of people who vote Labour and the lives of our other constituents. The Government should protect all citizens equally, and it is frankly unacceptable that my constituents and many others are being left worse off by this Government. The people of this country are watching, and, with the local elections on their way, they will know which party stands for their best interests.

I was listening to the Minister earlier when he was giving out statistics and saying how the Government had done this and done that. The truth is that they have

[Naz Shah]

this April failed for a fifth time to publish their Green Paper on health and social care. How can any council have confidence in this Government when they hide behind the Brexit shambles to avoid dealing with the issues that are pertinent to our communities? What kind of decisions do the Government want our councils to make in 2019 when we do not have enough money? Do they want them to cut social care? Do they want them to cut children's services? Or do they want them to cut bin collections, which have already dropped down to once a fortnight?

The upcoming fair funding review is a proper stitch-up. It threatens to make the funding situation even worse, as it proposes to remove deprivation as a factor in its core funding calculations. Let me tell the Minister this: removing deprivation as a core issue in the funding formula will be absolutely devastating. She should come to Bradford West; I will show her what deprivation really is. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has already warned that removing deprivation in that way would result in moving resources from the more deprived councils to the less deprived, predominantly Conservative-controlled suburban and rural councils. How is that fair and equal?

These cuts have not hit all councils equally. Analysis from the Commons Library shows that, since 2010, Tory areas have had a far smaller reduction in spending power per household as a percentage and in cash terms. Government policy has led to an increased dependency on council tax as a funding mechanism, leading to a postcode lottery and hitting deprived families hardest. Households in Labour areas pay an average of £351 less in council tax. How can this Government be okay with the deprivation in Bradford West and places like it? We need to elect as many Labour councillors as possible on 2 May to stand up against these unfair Tory cuts. The people of this country are watching, as I have said. They know which party stands for their best interests. If the Conservatives are so confident, let them close their eyes when they look at the polls and call a general election. We on this side of the House are ready to give this country the Government it deserves.

5.42 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). She is a doughty champion for her constituents, and she made the point incredibly powerfully that taking deprivation out of the local government funding calculation is absolutely shameful. It is constituencies like hers and mine that will suffer the brunt of that, and I pay tribute to her for her words.

Redcar and Cleveland has had a raw deal over the past nine years. I have lost count of the number of times I have stood up here in this Chamber to talk about the unfair and disproportionate cuts that areas such as mine have suffered. As we have said, it is the deprived areas that are not getting the funding and support that they need. We have had a big debate this afternoon about how much money is in the pot and whose fault it is that there is not enough, but this is not just about how much money is available for local government; it is about how it is distributed. It was clear from the evidence given by my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and

Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and from some Conservative MPs that the funding has been shifted under this Government. It has been moved from the areas that need it most to areas that are doing fine. There is a deep unfairness and flaw in the funding system as it stands.

Redcar and Cleveland has now lost £90 million since 2010. That is £662 per person; each of my constituents has lost £662. On top of that, they have had to pay more through precepts in social care and policing, yet they have still lost 500 police officers and they are still getting worse services. They are paying twice. My constituents are among the poorest. We still have council tax based on 1991 housing prices, but areas such as mine have not seen house prices rise; the value of my constituents' assets has not risen. They are still paying a deeply regressive council tax that is proportionately much tougher on them than it is on many others throughout the country. They are paying more through precepts and getting less from their services. That is simply not fair.

My council has lost a third of its central Government funding. How on earth can it be expected to continue to deliver the standards of service that people want? I pay tribute to Sue Jeffrey, the leader of the Labour-run Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council, which has continued to do amazing work to defend our constituents and to provide fantastic opportunities and events for people who come to the area. The council has continued to provide the services that many people need and has done so without leaving behind the most vulnerable. I also pay tribute to Amanda Skelton and to all the council staff who work so hard.

Redcar and Cleveland does struggle, however. We have high levels of deprivation and child poverty. We have higher unemployment than most of the country and lower health and wellbeing outcomes. As a seaside town in a former industrial area, we have an increasingly ageing population. On top of all that, we had an economic shock in 2015 following the loss of 3,000 jobs after the closure of the steelworks, which had a huge knock-on effect on public services in the local area. This is not just about the devastating personal tragedies of those who lost their jobs, because there was another knock-on effect in terms of higher dependency on benefits and more insecure and poorly paid work. The average salary of someone who worked at the steelworks has declined by £10,000, and many people had to move away to look for work. The effect of all that on our communities, high streets and towns has been devastating, and the local authority lost £10 million in business rates following the closure of the steelworks on top of the funding cuts about which we have already heard.

As I said, despite the funding pressures, our council has continued to do a really good job, and I am incredibly proud of it. It has protected services for the vulnerable and has kept our libraries and leisure centres open. It has tried really hard to invest in our town and village centres, with a particular focus on economic development. For example, Eston has received £2 million over the past two years, with a further £1 million coming for its precinct. An award-winning employment and training hub has been established, getting over 1,000 people into work in just 18 months. The hub sprang out of crisis following the loss of the steelworks, but it has been innovative, going right into our most deprived communities and supporting people who may not have had a CV before, to get them the necessary training and experience

to get into employment. I am incredibly proud of that groundbreaking work. There are plans to invest £40 million in the regeneration of the iconic Regent Cinema on the seafront and a further £95 million to create 4,500 jobs, so our local authority is working hard and doing its best. Redcar has a bright future, but we are doing things locally and we are doing them ourselves.

Social care is the big theme of today's debate, and we know that it represents the biggest pressure on local authority spending. It is projected that over-65s will make up a quarter of Redcar and Cleveland's population by 2030, so we have an ageing demographic. While it is fantastic that children with complex needs and conditions and older adults are living longer, that means greater costs. As others have said, it is ridiculous that we are still waiting for the social care Green Paper, which has been postponed five times since 2017. This Government have no vision for the future of social care, and strategy and direction are sorely lacking.

Faced with that vacuum, local leaders are again stepping forward, taking up the mantle and trying to deal with the crisis. Redcar and Cleveland is seeing fantastic innovation, such as the intermediate care centre that will open later this spring, and we have invested in specialist support, including a recovery and independence team that goes out to support people in their homes. I am also proud of Redcar's Care Academy. We know that jobs in the sector are underfunded and have a high turnover, so hopefully the academy will ensure that such roles are highly skilled and valued going forward.

We are using the money that we have, although it is not enough, to deliver better care for residents, but that is no substitute for proper investment. Unfortunately, inadequate care means that too many people are having to step into caring roles. We rely upon an army of unpaid family members—overwhelmingly women—who are taking care of their relatives. Many of them have to give up work to take up that role, and many of them are older people, as we have heard today. A huge burden has been placed on them, and we must do more to help by looking after their loved ones and taking away that burden.

That is where the money should be going but instead, in the past few weeks, we have seen £4 billion spent on no-deal preparations when the Government have completely acknowledged that we were never going to have a no deal—it was some crazy, ridiculous pretence at a negotiation. If Labour had won the election in 2017, we would have invested double that in social care. That is where money should be going in this country. We would have brought in a living wage for carers, we would have ended 15-minute care visits and we would have increased carer's allowance. That is exactly the sort of thing a Government who care about the many, not the few, would be looking at. Instead, we are wasting money by frittering it away on the Tory soap opera of Brexit.

Labour Members want to tackle the burning injustices in our communities, and we want to help those most in need. We need a Government who will invest in social care for the 21st century without forcing elderly people into selling or remortgaging their home, who will support families to secure the care their relatives need, who will support families to cope with disadvantage, and who will prevent children from having to be taken into care. We need a system that preserves dignity and quality of life in old age.

Councils are at breaking point, yet we see Labour councils out there defending the most vulnerable, striving hard for their communities and creating safe and decent places to live, but communities like mine are being left behind by austerity. We have had enough warm words; we need investment in local government and fairness in distribution. No more austerity, no more cuts.

5.51 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley).

I start by thanking and paying tribute to all the frontline care staff around the country, and to all the family carers, informal carers and those working extremely hard in voluntary services in all our constituencies. In my constituency, I pay tribute to Dartmouth Caring, Totnes Caring, Brixham Does Care, South Brent and District Caring, and Kingsbridge and Saltstone Caring. I know that similar voluntary services are working across the country in tandem with the NHS to provide excellent care to our constituents, but they are under pressure as never before.

There is a devastating impact on those affected—those who are not getting the care services they need; not only working-age adults but older adults, and their families. There is also an impact on the NHS. If people cannot access care services, there is not only an impact on their dignity, mobility and wellbeing but they are much more likely to end up in hospital—a place they do not want to be and at much higher cost—sometimes with serious illnesses or injuries that could have been avoided by better prevention and early intervention.

We need to deal with this issue, and the House needs to appreciate the scale of the challenge. Let us look at the demographics. We know from the Office for National Statistics that, last year, 18% of our population nationally was aged over 65, but that in 14 years' time 23% of our population nationally will be over 65. Of course it is a good thing that people are living longer, but they are living longer with multiple disabilities and we need to be prepared for that. We need to be prepared not only for the scale of the shortfall we face right now but for what is coming in the future. When we talk about social care funding, we need not only to acknowledge the impact of the shortfall we have here and now, and how we are going to deal with it, but to plan seriously for what is coming down the track.

In my constituency, we are already there. My constituency has a much older population than in many parts of the country and, even when they can afford to pay for care, people cannot find the workforce to care for them. There is a real crisis in our social care workforce, which needs investment. We need to value and nurture that workforce. We know what works, but we also know it will require serious investment.

I am afraid that one of the features of such debates is that the blame bounces backwards and forwards when, in fact, cross-party working and consensus building is what is really needed. The funding choices we face are difficult. I agree with the hon. Member for Redcar, who highlighted why this cannot all be funded at a local level. Doing so just widens inequality, because the areas that are least able to pay have the greatest need. It is unrealistic for everything to come from a local level, so we need to work towards a national solution to the problem.

[Dr Sarah Wollaston]

The Health and Social Care Committee, which I chair, has worked together with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee—I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who has also spoken about this—and we know what works. The tragedy is that we could deal with the problem. Our joint Committees looked at the options and achieved a cross-party consensus; we worked alongside a citizens’ assembly, because we think it is really important to build consensus outside this House. There are some principles we should be following. I urge the Minister, in her response, to tell us when the social care Green Paper will be published and commit to ensuring that it looks at the work of our joint Select Committees and the citizens’ assembly.

We can move forward, but if we have learned anything from the Brexit process, surely it has to be that we cannot build consensus at the end of a process; we have to build it in right from the start. I hope that the Green Paper will be designed to achieve that, and that it will set out the principle of fairness in the funding of social care. One statistic that we should all be aware of is that in the next 14 years, as our demographic changes and the percentage of our population aged over 65 increases to 23%, there will be 4.4 million more citizens aged over 65 but only 1.5 million extra citizens aged under 65. It is simply not sustainable to allow all the extra cost to fall on working-age, employed adults, so we must look at how to spread it fairly across the generations and between the employed and the self-employed.

I agree with Members who have talked this afternoon about reimagining national insurance as national health and care insurance. If we are truly to move towards a system that expands not only eligibility but quality, we need to bring more funding into the total system; the funding cannot just come from local sources. I urge the Minister to set out what she feels about the measures highlighted in the joint Select Committee report, and whether the Government will commit to coming up with a solution that can deliver real change, rather than kicking the issue down the line.

The wrong lesson to learn from the last general election campaign would be, “Don’t ever set out who has to pay more.” We all need to do that now, between elections. We must be realistic with our constituents about the fact that everybody needs to pay more, and we must build their trust in the idea that the increase will be delivered fairly. The consequences of doing nothing will be that more and more of our constituents will be left in desperate conditions, without carers to look after them; more and more of our care providers will go to the wall; and there will be no increase in the quality of care delivered on the ground, because there will not be the funding to support the workforce. We have to grasp the nettle with these difficult choices.

Before I close, I want to say something about Brexit. There is no version of Brexit that will deliver anything positive for health and social care, especially if we look at the impact on the workforce. The Minister will know that in parts of the south-east and London, in particular, social care is very heavily dependent on access to a workforce from the European Union. That is also the case in my constituency. Nationally, around 7% of the social care workforce are from the EU. If we cut off

access to that workforce, not only will we miss out on an incredibly important and valued skilled workforce by making it more difficult for them to come here, but we will add costs. Many of the people who work in social care—in fact, the vast majority—will not meet the current proposed earnings thresholds that will allow them to come here easily on, for example, tier 2 visas.

We need a way to nurture our workforce and to make it easy for people to come here to work and to feel valued. I do not want to meet any more people in my constituency who work in the NHS and social care and tell me that after decades of dedicated service to this country, they no longer feel welcome.

6 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

Having listened to the contributions today, it seems that there is a consensus that our social care system is broken, but some Members seem to be living with their heads in the clouds. To describe our social care system as broken is an understatement: it is a national scandal of which we should be ashamed. I am certain that Members present get the same casework as I get. It is the stuff of nightmares. Social care is one of those issues that genuinely keeps me awake at night.

Behind all the statistics that we hear today, there is a heartbreaking human reality. As many others will have done, I have sat and fought back the tears as I have listened to those at my local surgeries who are exhausted from the battle to get the most basic level of support for their loved ones. We have only to read some of the reports from recent Care Quality Commission inspections to get a feel for the state of our social care system today. It is beyond broken.

One report, following an inspection in Crewe and Nantwich last year, found one person with injuries that were unaccounted for. It described another person as “extremely anxious and afraid that they would be injured”, and said that they “lay in their bed in the foetal position” and that “their feet were dirty and their hair matted.”

I will never forget visiting an older lady in a nursing home who was still haunted by her experience in a previous facility, where she had suffered the most undignified neglect—a lady left shocked and confused after decades of working and paying taxes and paying national insurance contributions.

Today, I wish to focus our attention on those who work in social care. It takes a certain kind of person to work in the care sector, and I pay tribute to them all. They experience this rotten system almost every single day of their lives, yet they carry on with compassion and professionalism, despite the poverty pay and despite feeling ignored and undervalued by the Government. These are the people we rely on to protect the dignity and independence of our relatives, friends and neighbours.

What does it say about us as a nation that our social care workforce is one of the most exploited and underpaid? I cannot even imagine how it must feel to be that type of person and to be forced to leave somebody who is under their care before they have had the time to wash them, or to help them to eat. But who cares for the carers? A care worker described how staff morale was at rock

bottom, with many care workers suffering from poor mental health and worried about their job security, relying on food banks and payday loans, too scared to take time off sick. He said he felt that care workers have no voice and no respect.

As if things were not bad enough, one group of care workers, many of whom already work for the minimum wage, face losing hundreds of pounds a month because their employer, Alternative Futures Group, has taken the decision to slash payments for sleep-in shifts. Sleep-in shifts are an integral part of our care service that the Government have a statutory obligation to provide. I have spoken many times previously about the importance of this work.

Calling them sleep-in shifts can often lead to people getting the wrong impression. One of the affected workers explained to me in an email this week:

“Sometimes you have to deal with emergency situations and take a client to hospital. You never properly sleep – you are half-awake all night – listening in case that person needs you. Often, we are up 5 or 6 times a night, taking them to the toilet or calming them down when they are agitated”.

She went on to describe how she often finished a sleep-in shift only to start another day in work, often going days without seeing her three children. For her, the cut in pay will mean losing £300 a month—the cost of her bills. She is now having to consider getting a second job, or even leaving the job that she loves. One of her colleagues whom I met recently is already working a second job. She also goes days at a time without seeing her child. Both ladies work with adults with learning difficulties and their duties include administering medication, PEG—percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy—feeding, as well as washing, dressing, helping with finances and facilitating day trips.

As well as physical support, these workers also provide emotional support for the people for whom they care. Their passion for their work shines through, but the cut to their income has been the final straw and, for the first time ever, these workers have been left with no option other than to take industrial action. I stand in solidarity with those workers—as should every Member here today. They are in no way to blame for the problems in our social care system.

I questioned AFG’s decision to cut the rate of pay for sleep-in shifts given that there has been no reduction in the payment that it receives from Cheshire East Council. Its response was somewhat alarming: it claims that the funding provided by the council has never been sufficient to cover the full costs of paying the national living wage rate for sleep-ins. The charity says that its position is that

“it wants to pay above the national minimum wage for all care hours”

but that this requires additional funding. I share AFG’s concerns about what it describes as

“the dire situation funding of care is having on hard-working care staff.”

However, Cheshire East Council assures me that it does not pay providers any less for sleep-in support than it does for waking-night support and that it believes that care providers should be paying at least the national minimum wage rate. When I recently asked what the Government were doing to make sure that local authorities have enough funding to allow providers to pay sleep-ins at the national living wage rate, the Chief Secretary to

the Treasury replied that it was currently working on this with the Department of Health and Social Care, which implies that it is not being paid.

Will the Government accept responsibility for this dispute and admit that they are not providing adequate funding? If they do not, we really need to explore why this funding is not reaching the frontline. Whatever the case, it is the overworked and underpaid care workers who are paying the price, as well as the elderly and vulnerable members of our communities who rely on this vital service.

In her summing up, I hope that the Minister will address the following points. First, what advice do the Government currently give to social care providers and commissioning authorities in the light of the current legal situation regarding payment for sleep-in shifts? Will she join me in calling on AFG to take up Unison’s offer of a meeting to continue these negotiations in the hope of resolving this ongoing dispute? Secondly, will she commit to looking into the dispute to determine whether AFG receives sufficient funding to pay its workers at the national living wage rate? Thirdly, will she acknowledge that the Government could simply pass new legislation, positively applying the national living wage rate to sleep-in shifts? That would give the sector the certainty that it needs and make sure that care workers are remunerated as so many believe they should be.

We have been repeatedly promised a social care Green Paper, which will focus on a valued workforce as one of its principles, but I have little faith that it will ever even appear. It has been delayed for the fifth time since the Government first promised to publish it before I was even elected two years ago. If it is published, I am confident that it will not contain the radical solutions that this country owes to its elderly citizens and to the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Our problems in social care are systemic and structural. The only beneficiaries of the system are the private companies that are profiting from this misery and it is they who benefit from this Government’s inaction. In previous debates, I have raised my concerns about how, without any real debate, market values have penetrated areas where they do not belong, and social care is perhaps the worst example of this. As far back as 2016, the Centre for Health and the Public Interest outlined the failings of privatised adult social care. Research commissioned by Independent Age has produced several policy options that serve as a starting point for any political discussion, and it shows just what can be done where there is a will to do so.

We need to address these failings now, with an immediate uplift in funding, while we build a sustainable model for the future. Not to do so is a political choice and a clear expression of how this Government prioritise the elderly and most vulnerable people we represent, and those whom we employ to provide care services. Those working in social care need to be listened to. They can help us to build a national care service that is based on need and not profitability—one that is centred on independent living for all and dignity in later life.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I think that there are four colleagues remaining who wish to contribute. On the assumption that the wind-ups begin no later than 6.40 pm, colleagues can do the arithmetic for themselves, but we have just under half an hour for four speeches.

6.10 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a privilege to follow a very moving speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), who outlined the severe problems faced by our social care service.

On a slightly different note, last year I had the pleasure of attending the launch of renovation works to an historic old primary school in my constituency. Derelict for several years, the school lies at the heart of the Parkhouse district of my constituency of Glasgow North East. The Wheatley Group—the inheritor of Glasgow's municipal housing stock—acquired the school for conversion to new sheltered social housing. The name Wheatley and the history of the school itself evoked a reflection on the long and proud heritage of municipal socialism in Glasgow, and what the prospects might be for that tradition to re-emerge in the future.

Parkhouse was one of the first districts to be developed for municipal housing by the Glasgow Corporation after the passing of the historic Housing Act 1924, led by Glasgow Labour MP John Wheatley, during the first Labour Government. These state subsidies for house building led directly to the creation of Glasgow's municipal housing department, and saw the large-scale building of some 57,000 new homes in Parkhouse and other districts such as Riddrie and Carntyne in my constituency during the inter-war period. Indeed, the pressure to develop suitable land for new municipal housing led to Glasgow more than doubling in size, from over 5,000 hectares to over 12,000 hectares during the 1920s and 1930s.

At that time, the gas supply, water, electricity, subway, hospitals, tramways and even the telephones were all in direct municipal ownership, and there was much talk of Glasgow as a European model for municipal socialism. Indeed, at the international conference on workers' dwelling houses in Paris in 1900, Glasgow Councillor Daniel Macaulay Stevenson, after learning that the municipal control of housing was regarded as impractical by delegates, remarked that, far from that being the case, it had been carried out to an ever greater extent for 29 years in Glasgow. He elucidated the Glasgow Corporation's extensive portfolio of services under municipal ownership, which the delegates regarded as “nothing short of rank socialism”.

It is interesting to see that some sentiments do not change, even more than a century later.

The scale of that sort of intervention to address the city's social problems is scarcely imaginable today. There is simply no capacity or scope within local government to undertake the sort of mission-driven improvement that can massively improve quality of life. Today in Scotland, after two decades of devolution, we now have the most centralised system of government of any country in Europe. We have the absurdity of the Glasgow city region's wealthiest suburbs carved up into self-contained enclaves, where the residents enjoy relatively low rates of council tax, while the residents of the urban core of the city—home to the poorest communities in the region—must carry the burden of maintaining and operating all the core services and amenities enjoyed by its wealthier suburban free riders. Not only has Glasgow been stripped of its residential tax base through historical depopulation and the relatively recent gerrymandering of its suburbs; the advent of the Scottish Parliament has seen a continuing war of attrition against the power of local government.

This year, the Scottish Government are set to impose cuts on Glasgow that are unprecedented in recent times and will lead to a further decline in public services in the city. According to the Scottish Parliament's information service, the local government revenue budget was cut by 6.9%, whereas the Scottish Government's revenue budget fell by just 1.6%, between 2013 and 2018. Over the same period, Glasgow City Council's core budget has been cut by 12.8%. That is almost twice the average cut to Scotland's 32 council areas, and seven times the cuts to the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government are proposing a further disproportionate cut to Glasgow of 3.6%—or £41 million—this year.

Although there is no question but that the Tories are to blame for cutting the block grant of the Government in Edinburgh by 1.6%, to multiply the percentage cut by four to 6.9% for councils—and by even more than that in Glasgow—is a deep injustice. The only conclusion we can draw is that local government, and Glasgow in particular, has been targeted disproportionately. Our city is having to absorb a cut to its budget proportionately seven times greater than the cut being absorbed by the Government in Edinburgh. That is £233 per head for each Glaswegian between 2010 and 2018.

Already 30,000 Scottish council jobs have gone, swimming pools are being closed, community health projects face non-renewal, class sizes are rising, pupil attainment is stalling, high streets are declining, community groups are losing grants, youth clubs are closing, grass is being left uncut, litter is piling up, roads and pavements are in serious disrepair, and social workers face ever-increasing case loads. In Glasgow North East, we face the potential closure of a local swimming pool, a sports centre and numerous municipal golf courses that were only spared cuts this year after a determined local campaign to save them caused such embarrassment that the council reversed its decision.

Glasgow is unfairly bearing the brunt of decisions to scale up the cuts as a share of its overall budget compared with the Scottish Government. Labour will end Tory austerity at source when the Leader of the Opposition steps into No. 10 Downing Street, but in the meantime Glasgow simply cannot take a further hit that is so disproportionate to that being taken by the Scottish Government. I am continually being contacted by spontaneous local campaigns coming into existence to fight the cuts that Glasgow is making because of the severe retrenchment it has been asked to make. We are facing the closure of entire facilities and services, and the council's withdrawal from non-statutory quality-of-life provision in my constituency, which is one of the poorest parts of this country. Indeed, last year, the SNP tried to pass the burden of cuts on to working parents by doubling childcare fees, and was only forced to retreat after a determined local campaign.

The Scottish Government need to recognise that Glasgow's settlement should be no worse than the 1.6% cut that the Scottish Government block grant has suffered since 2013. I plead with the Scottish Government and the UK Government to combine to ensure that, at a bare minimum, they rescind this negative multiplier effect.

Dr Whitford: The resource budget of the Scottish Government has been cut 7% since 2010, not 1%. The idea that they have faced only a 1% cut is nonsense.

Mr Sweeney: Perhaps the hon. Lady is not fully aware that the total managed expenditure of the Scottish Government has been cut by only 1.6%. Unlike councils, they have total discretion over that spending. Councils are heavily ring-fenced by the Scottish Government, which is why core budget cuts to councils have been much higher. That is the reality of the constraints faced by local government compared with the central Government in Edinburgh.

Unless Scotland urgently addresses the problem of over-centralised government from Edinburgh and rediscovers its radical tradition of municipal socialism, it is increasingly likely that Glasgow will fall further behind its peer cities in the UK, such as Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool, as they establish new city region governments centred around directly elected metro mayors. The constitutional debate has been preoccupied with nationalist questions over the distribution of powers between the British Parliament at Westminster and the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood; it is now incumbent on us all to break that narcissistic duopoly of Parliaments and strive to rediscover our radical tradition of municipal socialism.

We in the Labour movement are not driven by nationalist sentiment when it comes to constitutional questions about how best to structure government to serve the interests of delivering socialist policy. The atrophy of municipal government in Glasgow is an urgent crisis, which we must address boldly and with imagination. As we consider plans for a constitutional convention in the new future, the question of a municipal as well as a parliamentary route to socialism must be firmly embedded at the heart of it.

6.17 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who is a tireless and passionate campaigner for his constituency—and a member of the wonderful 2017 intake.

Areas with the greatest needs, the lowest tax base and the least other resources seem to be suffering a much greater reduction than their wealthier counterparts, and Hull is no exception. I am not the only one saying that; the National Audit Office is saying it, too. The NAO has produced powerful information showing a disproportionate impact on Hull, which is creating the need for painful decisions. The situation is compounded by reductions in the central funding on which Hull relies for 81% of its budget and which it is unable to replace through local taxation. To illustrate, a local tax increase of 1% in Hull raises only £2.90 per head, whereas a local tax increase of 1% in the City of London raises £7.08 per head. Our situation is completely different. Hull, which is reliant on central Government, receives less money than ever from central Government.

Even though statistics are important, and much of our debate focuses on statistics and the percentage loss for each local area, we are forgetting the human element. To be honest, the people at the heart of it who are being affected do not care which Government introduced a measure; they do not care whose fault it is. They do not like politicians who point fingers at each other and say, “It wasn’t us. It was you.” What these people care about is what is happening to them there and then, on the ground.

I would like to talk about a couple I met recently, and to protect their anonymity, I will refer to them as Lily and Paul. Paul came to see me at my constituency office, and he was extremely upset and quite distressed. He told me about his wife. They were quite a young couple, only in their early 50s, but his wife had developed tumours on her spine. The tumours had appeared from nowhere, and no one had any idea she was ill. It started with back ache, and she ended up in hospital, needing to have the tumours operated on.

From that moment, her husband became her carer and had to do everything for her. They went from having a fit and active life, both in work, to him looking after his wife, who was bedbound. He was practically at breaking point as he told me how they met when they were 14 years old. She was the only woman he had ever been in love with, and he still loved her, even though at that moment she was lying in bed in their house unable to leave the bedroom or get down the stairs because occupational therapists had not been round to install a handrail, and they could not get a stairlift fitted because it was the wrong kind of staircase. She had been discharged from hospital without a care plan or an adult social care package available. All she was doing was lying in their bed.

Paul brought his daughter round to look after his wife so that he could come and tell me about the problems they were facing. Unsurprisingly, he said that she was suffering problems with her mental health. I said, “Well, of course; I would suffer problems with my mental health if I was unable to leave my bed and was left there in constant pain.” She was left in pain from the operation on the tumours on her spine, and the drugs were making her drowsy and incoherent.

To make matters worse, the Department for Work and Pensions informed them that she needed to attend a healthcare assessment—a woman who was bedbound, having had operations on her spine. He was dealing with this on a day-to-day basis, while seeing the woman he had loved from the age of 14 and still deeply loved in such pain and such a desperate situation. Eventually the DWP relented, and someone came to do an assessment of her. Paul said that his wife could not answer the questions properly because the amount of opiates she was on to deal with her pain meant that she would not fully understand all the questions, but he was told by the person doing the assessment that, as her husband, he should not be answering for her and should allow her to answer the questions herself, even though she barely understood what was being said.

He came into my constituency office just yesterday to tell me that his wife has not been declared sick enough to qualify for the mobility component of the benefit. He has been left unable to work, and his wife, who he is desperately in love with, is unable to get the support she needs and is being turned down for enhanced benefits. Goodness me! How sick does someone have to be to get enhanced benefits if they are on drugs that make them incoherent and are laid in their bed, unable to move? I asked Paul, “What about you? Are you getting any respite or care?” He said, “I can’t, because what happens to her if I become ill? What happens to her if I’m not there? She doesn’t fully understand because she’s on pain medication.”

This is what people are facing. When we hear from those on the Front Benches, let us not point fingers at each other and say, “Your Government did this,” and, “Your Government did that.” Let us look at what is

[Emma Hardy]

happening to people like this right now. Let us look at the fact that life expectancy is dropping in my constituency. Tell me then that this Government's reforms have been successful and that it is not time to change. Do not give me a quote about the amount of money. Tell me about the people whose lives are being changed because they are not getting the support they need. Until I see a real difference on the ground, all the rest of it is just spin. Please, Minister, come to the Dispatch Box and tell me you have listened and that people like Paul and Lily will get the support they need and not be left to suffer any longer.

6.24 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) has summed up the importance of today's debate. The reality is that care does not come for nothing; it costs money, and it is about where this Government's priorities actually sit. We have heard the talk about millions and billions of pounds so many times, yet the very people in our society who need special care are so often overlooked.

I want to thank the staff of City of York Council for the incredible work they do for my city, as they have in very difficult times over the last four years. Decisions are often made that they do not agree with, yet they have complied with them as servants of our people, and that is against the backdrop of losing a fifth of their wages in real terms.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) highlighted how careworkers in particular are paid so poorly. Why? They are women. The fact is that this Government take it that women will not go out on strike and will not fight, but will care instead because they know how desperately people need their labour. They know how desperately people need them to visit and how, if they do not turn up that day, somebody will be worse off. That is why money is not put in: because they care and because they are women. The inequality that is now embedded so deeply in our system highlights to me how broken the funding system for local government is.

Beyond that, we know that local government itself does not get the investment, yet it is where change can really happen. We heard earlier about how Labour brought in a place-based system, looking at how to get the interconnectivity of different lines of funding. Now we see the fragmentation, the diktats from Government and the pulling apart of local communities, and I see that reflected in my local area as well. The whole system of funding is broken, and funding has not been spread out to where there is greatest need.

Returning to the issue of older people, I want to highlight this point. In this place, we talk about older people only with regard to social care and pensions, which are seen as financial burdens on the state. We do not talk about how the state can invest in these really precious lives and ensure that their rights are upheld right to the end. That is why the all-party group on ageing and older people, of which I am the chair, set up an inquiry into the human rights of older people, and the report came back saying that it is absolutely vital that there is a commission on the rights of older people.

I have written to both the Ministers sitting on the Front Bench—the Minister for Care and the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—and I have to say that the response has been woeful. We are talking about the rights, voice, opportunity and future of older people, but they are just dismissed. I believe that is why we have seen the delay in the social care Green Paper, which, let us face it, is a discussion document and is not going to change anything. The prioritisation placed on the most vulnerable people in our society is wrong, and we have got to see change.

If we are talking about wider change, there is the funding of local authorities as well, and it is a broken system. When we look at business rates—I have debated them many times in this place—we see that, as the high streets are hollowed out, the business rates return even less, so local government's dependency on business rates does not work. We have of course seen precepts, which are regressive, and the council tax, which at its concept was a stopgap for the failed poll tax system. We need to look at funding for local authorities in a very different way.

This is not just about funding, but about how funding interconnects with the social ambition of our councillors. I have to say that Labour's vision in York is very different from that of the current administration, which has just let the market move in. Profit-obsessed developers are now building luxury apartments all over our city, which, quite frankly, people in York cannot afford. We are one of the lowest-wage economies in the north: wages fell in York by £66 last year, and pay is £80 a week lower than the national average.

We are a post-industrial city and we are struggling, yet people are exploiting our city. Just two weeks ago, the council agreed plans to put up 2,000 luxury flats in the middle of our city when we have a housing crisis. Eleven people died on our streets last year, and we have families—whole families—in cramped, one-bedroom box rooms, and they are damp as well. What is happening on the ground in local authority areas is completely unacceptable. It is the responsibility of Government to wake up to the reality. I do not want to hear platitudes; I want to see action.

York is the most inequitable city outside of London; the inequality and life expectancy there show that there is failure in the system. It may work for some, but it certainly is not working for the many. Labour's vision for our city is very different. We want investment in people. We want to give them back their voice so that they can build their future. That is what we will do, should we come to power on 2 May.

People have exploited our city. The post office, Bootham Park Hospital and the barracks have been sold, but the money has not come back into our city. Those sites have been handed over to developers who, quite frankly, just want to make money; they do not want to invest in people. Our city is crying out for a change in approach. It looks shabby and dirty. Waste is not being addressed and recycling rates are falling. The issues that people care about in our communities are not being addressed.

The Labour party, however, is ambitious. We will put in place a transport commission to address air pollution, which is taking 150 lives a year in our city. We will make it a carbon-neutral city by 2030, which is more ambitious by far than this Government. We will ensure that we

invest in green spaces, because that is a more holistic approach and better for people's health. We will make those connections and join the dots.

Why do that in York? We only need look back 100 years, when Seebohm Rowntree carried out his studies of poverty in our city. We will also do that, should we get elected in May, and look at the real deprivation that exists in our city. The Rowntree family then built jobs and housing, put in education and pension systems, promoted the leisure and pleasure that people should enjoy in their everyday lives, and rebuilt York out of the slums. That is what Labour will do again, should we be given the opportunity on 2 May. We will not only analyse what has gone wrong—it is there for everyone to see—but give people the security they deserve and hope for their future so that they can join us on the journey to build a compassionate, humane city.

6.32 pm

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Ind): It is an honour to participate in this debate and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell).

We were told last year by both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor that austerity is over. I beg to differ, because austerity is alive and well in Peterborough. Our revenue support grant is just £10 million this year, which means that it has been cut by more than 80%. Since 2010, this Government have cut £20 million of funding from my local council, which has meant a £431 loss per year for each household in the same period. That money has been taken straight from the pockets of my constituents. It could have funded 37 children's centres and 1,162 domiciliary care workers.

In addition, it is estimated that there is a nationwide shortfall of £1 billion to bridge the funding gap in children and adult social care. As people work and live for longer, that gap will continue to increase. When will this Government wake up to the fact that these cuts to our local council and social care budgets have seriously harmed their ability to function? Our councils are so starved of funding that they can only just about fulfil their statutory obligations. The cuts are having a devastating impact on Peterborough City Council's funding and the cash-strapped social care sector.

If the Government are truly serious about ending austerity, they will invest in our schools, councils and public services, and they will do it sooner rather than later. Warm words that austerity is over will not cut it. In order for my constituents to have continued access to the basic provisions that my council should be providing, this Government need to invest. We need deeds, not words.

6.34 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Today, we have heard from many hon. Members about the disastrous impact of the Government's relentless and short-sighted cuts to council budgets from Hull to Westminster North, from York to Nottinghamshire, from West Ham to Lewisham, from Birmingham to St Helens, from Sheffield to Exeter, Burnley, Hartlepool, Tyneside, Chesterfield and many others. Nowhere, as we have heard in the debate, has that disastrous impact been felt more acutely than in social care. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and for Crewe and

Nantwich (Laura Smith), whom we heard from in the past hour, on presenting such powerful stories about family carers and the role of care staff, the absolutely vital two parts of the backbone of social care.

Social care is one of the most important pillars of support for vulnerable people up and down the country. I pay tribute to all our dedicated and hard-working care staff, many of whom are in the dilemma my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) just talked about. It is sad that the cuts mean we are in a situation where care staff have to go on strike for their pay, because many of them go above and beyond in the most difficult of circumstances to make sure that older people and disabled people get the help they need. We think a lot about NHS staff, but let us face it: without our 1.4 million care staff the care system would simply collapse. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) raised the crucial fact that there are 110,000 vacant posts in the care workforce. That vacancy rate is deeply concerning, because it makes the situation for the staff who are doing the job much, much worse.

The Government should be shouting from the rafters about the value of social care, but most of the time there has instead been a wall of silence. It is only by securing this Opposition day debate today that we have been able to raise this issue. There is very little coverage of the issue elsewhere. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) talked about the vacuum around Government policy on social care, and she was right to do that. Ministers seem not to want talk about a vision for social care. That is not surprising, I guess, following the Government's litany of broken promises about reform. Let me just touch on some of them.

The Government dropped the cap on care costs, due to come into effect in 2016—we had legislated for a cap on care costs—leaving thousands of people unexpectedly having to pay for their own care. Then, at the general election in 2017 we had the so-called dementia tax, a disastrous proposal which lasted only four days before being abandoned. I have met family carers who are still desperately worried about that policy, because they think it is still around. Now, more than two years after promising a social care Green Paper, with the hope of better support for families across the country, the Government are still no nearer fixing the crisis that they have made. Let there be no doubt about it: this crisis has been made so much worse since 2010. We were told there would be a Green Paper in summer 2017 and then by the end of 2017, but it never arrived. It was then delayed till summer 2018 and then autumn 2018. Winter came and still no Green Paper. The Secretary of State told us at the start of the year that it would arrive by 1 April. It has not arrived and there is still no sign of the Green Paper. Perhaps the Minister will tell us when we are going to see it.

Now, when councils need an extra £1.5 billion to close the funding gap, the Government have offered derisory short-term funding. Last winter, the Government offered a measly £240 million for adult social for winter pressures. That would pay for only three months of home care for the older people the Secretary of State said it would help, but that is not enough. That was hardly enough for the harsh conditions of last winter, which, if you remember Mr Speaker, lasted very much more than three months. This year, councils will receive

[Barbara Keeley]

a further £410 million to be shared between older adults, working-age adults, and children's social care services. The Secretary of State is leaving councils and councillors to make the invidious choice between caring for the most at-risk children, vulnerable adults with disabilities, and our most frail and isolated older people. Throwing small, one-off pots of money at this problem every year will not deal with the crisis in the long term. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston said, it is a sticking plaster on a gaping wound.

James Cartledge: Will the hon. Lady set out her preference for how we should pay for long-term care?

Barbara Keeley: We get this every time we have a debate on social care—although we do not have many such debates—from Government Members who have no ideas whatsoever. I have just run through all the abandoned ideas and the abandoned promises that the Government have made on the Green Paper. I am really surprised that any Government Member actually has the cheek to stand up and ask Opposition Front Benchers what we would do. We laid out what we would do in 2010. We had a White Paper, not a Green Paper. We laid out all our proposals in our manifesto. We are the side with ideas and proposals on taking forward social care. This Government have no ideas and no vision, and I am amazed that an hon. Member really has the cheek to do that.

James Cartledge: It is very kind of the hon. Lady to give way. I spoke in the debate and said that we have some very difficult decisions to face. We need to be open with the public, and I said that we need to look at, for example, equity in residential property. I think that is unavoidable. Does she think we should do that?

Barbara Keeley: We have laid out our proposals and we said how we would fund them. As I say, most of what we are debating today relates to the short-term crisis. Once we got past the short-term crisis, I think the hon. Gentleman would have difficulty. There has been talk about involving the public in this. At the moment, the public are faced with the type of care that my hon. Friends have discussed and debated and with the care staff and workforce in the situation that they are in. At no point, in the middle of a crisis, would we be saying to the public, "Use the value of your property. Let's go for this type of funding or that type of funding." That is cloud cuckoo land. I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle talking about that absolutely crucial example. What would he say to those people who need care? That is the question for him to answer.

Councils need sustained investment that undoes the damage of years of austerity and cuts, but the Government's choice—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman is sitting there smirking at me at the moment. The Government have made a choice to pursue ideological cuts to council budgets that have seen £7 billion lost from adult social care spending since 2010. Let us think about what that has meant: 400,000 fewer people getting publicly funded social care between 2010 and 2015; 100,000 fewer people getting taxpayer-funded social care in the last four years alone; and 90 people a day dying before they receive the public social care for which they have applied.

It is not simply the most disadvantaged who are losing out either. Many of those who are having to foot the bill for their care are being exploited by a broken care system where private care providers can act with impunity and where vindictive care homes can evict older people whose families dare to complain about their standard of care. That is a very serious matter, as we discussed in the debate, given the level of closures of care homes and the loss of care home beds we have had, as touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) also talked about being in a part of the country where it is impossible to get care. That is the position we are in. If care home owners can evict older people, that is a drastic situation. Opportunistic home care agencies are overcharging vulnerable people for care visits that are too short and endangering their health by forcing staff to work when they are sick. We heard about the care staff who are too scared to take time off sick.

I want to make clear to hon. Members the human impact of not getting the right amount of support, although those who have bothered to attend this debate—I am thinking particularly of Government Members—might have heard some examples. Simply put, it means people going without the support that they need to live with basic dignity. Not having needs met means going unwashed and undressed. It can mean waiting for hours to go to the toilet because no help is available. It can mean a person going thirsty because there is no one to pour them a glass of water and going hungry because there is no one to prepare them a proper meal. This is the experience of many thousands of older people who are going without care or who have insufficient care. I am glad that many hon. Members have talked about a care visit being the only contact that many older or vulnerable people have in the day.

The consequences of inadequate support in the community for working-age people are also horrifying. In recent months, we have seen many reports of vulnerable autistic people and people with learning disabilities left to languish for years in private in-patient units—vulnerable, detained, secluded and neglected in long-stay units. These units, many of them private, are funded by the NHS at great cost to the taxpayer because councils simply have not been given the money to move people from these units to be supported closer to home. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) both raised that issue. I have stood at this Dispatch Box before and called this a national scandal, and I make no apology for doing so again.

Back to Government promises: after Winterbourne View in 2011, the Government promised to close inappropriate units for good within three years—by 2014. It did not happen. Indeed, eight years later, there are still 2,260 people detained in hospital settings when they need not be there. The number of adults trapped in these units has fallen by only a fraction. Worse still, the number of children in these units has actually increased.

Where this Conservative Government have done nothing, Labour will act: rather than years' more cuts, we will invest £8 billion in social care; rather than 90 people a day dying waiting for care, we will provide more people with the support they need; rather than care staff being pushed to the brink, we will pay them a real living wage; and rather than more delay, we will build a national care

service that supports older and disabled people when they need it. This is our message to people across the country, young and old, desperate for care and support: a Labour Government will give you the support you need and deserve. That is why I urge Members to support our motion tonight.

6.46 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinanage): I start by recognising and paying tribute to those who care for us. It is a mark of our society how we care for the most vulnerable. Across the country, whether working in a care home, a person's own home or at a day centre or another centre, so many dedicate their lives to caring for others. I also thank hon. Members from across the House who have taken the time to debate this important issue. We have heard a great number of passionate, measured, detailed speeches, and people have spoken about a range of issues and shown in-depth knowledge of and passion for their own constituencies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones) demonstrated the enormous knowledge one would expect from a former local government Minister in a wide-ranging speech that highlighted how most funding baselines take several factors into account, including deprivation. That is an incredibly important point. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, spoke passionately about the joint report that he and his Committee produced in partnership with the Health and Social Care Committee. He spoke about how it highlighted the importance of integration at a local level and the importance of housing, and he said it was important that the Government took that into consideration and came back to the House with our Green Paper. I pledge to him that we will do that.

Mr Betts: The obvious question: when will we see the Green Paper?

Caroline Dinanage: We will bring it forward as soon as possible. The hon. Gentleman's colleague, the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), made similar points about the importance of taking on board the hard work of the Select Committee, which came up with some interesting proposals for funding in particular.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Will the Minister also ensure that the Green Paper covers the vital work done by unpaid carers, who are often ignored in funding policy, particularly when it comes to funding breaks for these unpaid carers, who find it so difficult to get away?

Caroline Dinanage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to the incredible work of the army of unpaid carers out there and the immeasurable value they bring to the loved ones they look after. Not only will we cover them in the Green Paper, but we have looked at them as part of our dedicated action plan for carers, which we released last year and which we continue to work on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Dinanage: I want to make some progress, because a number of Members have made a lot of points and I want to try to cover them, but I will come back to those who want to ask questions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said, in the words of Bananarama, that "it's not what

you do, it's the way that you do it". She highlighted the innovative moves by her local council in East Sussex to look into delayed transfers of care and stepdown beds. She rightly paid tribute to the hard work of the NHS and local authority staff who do so much to stop people being trapped in hospital beds, which we know is no good for them in the long term.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) reminded us of the parlous financial situation that we inherited in 2010, and of all the difficult decisions that have had to be made across different councils and central Government as a result. He also gave some great examples of local councils that have achieved efficiencies through innovation, technology and sensible decisions, and spoke of the need for much more honesty and transparency as we try to find a solution to the problem of adult social care.

The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) made a thoughtful and measured speech, focusing mainly on adult social care. She spoke a lot about the workforce issue, about which I myself am particularly passionate. In February we launched an adult social care recruitment campaign called Every Day is Different. The aim is to raise the profile of the sector, and to encourage people with the right values to apply to work in this incredibly important role. The Department of Health and Social Care also funds the Skills for Care campaign to help the sector with recruitment, retention and workforce development. That includes the distribution of £12 million a year for a workforce development fund. Providers can bid for a share of the fund to help their staff to train and gain qualifications at all levels.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke passionately about carers, who have already been described as the unsung heroes of our health and care system. My hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) made a number of points, but, in particular, raised problems in relation to continuing care. NHS England has launched an improvement programme to help clinical commissioning groups to address variations in the assessment and granting of eligibility.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) made a thoughtful and heartfelt contribution. He talked specifically about the challenges facing coastal communities. I empathised with that, as I represent a coastal community myself. He said that Hartlepool was a vibrant and welcoming place. He is a great ambassador for his constituency—as, indeed, is my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who tells us all that her own constituency is the No. 1 place to live in the UK, and also the No. 1 hotspot for night life. I am not sure how she knows that! She spoke about the lottery of long-term care. We will seek to address the catastrophic way in which care costs can affect some individuals in the Green Paper, when it comes forward.

Norman Lamb: The Minister has just mentioned the Green Paper. I realise that she cannot say when it will be published, but do the Government intend it to lead to reform in the current Parliament when it is published, or are we likely to have to wait until some time in the middle of the next decade before any reform actually happens?

Caroline Dinenage: I think the honest answer to that question is that there will be a bit of both. The Green Paper is a big document which covers a range of issues. It will be possible for some developments to take place immediately, but others will take longer.

Dr Wollaston: The Minister's reply suggests that the Green Paper already exists. There is a great deal of frustration about the delay. The Green Paper was supposed to follow hard on the heels of the 10-year plan, because the two were closely linked. The Secretary of State gave a pledge from the Dispatch Box that it would be published before Christmas. Will the Minister at least set out the reasons for the delay, and give some indication of when we might expect it? It is such a crucial document.

Caroline Dinenage: As the hon. Lady will know, a version of the Green Paper already exists, but that does not mean that we are resting on our laurels while we are waiting for an opportunity to publish it. We are continuing to improve it and evolve it so that when we do publish it—as soon as possible—it will be in the best possible shape.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford also spoke about dementia, and about the importance of investing in dementia care and research. We lead the world in this regard, but we know that there is more to be done if we are to achieve our aspiration of being the best place in the world in which to live with dementia by 2020.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) spoke about some of the difficulties for councils that had been addressed by “working smarter”. She also said that she thought it unfortunate that councils had had to raise council tax in order to have the money that they need. I point out to her gently that the average annual increase in council tax bills from 1997 to 2010 was 5.8% and since 2010 it has been only 2.2%—half what it was under the previous Labour Government.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) spoke about youth violence and the importance of schools, social services, voluntary sector organisations and public health bodies working together through a community-led approach to deal with it. She was absolutely right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) spoke about the challenges facing rural communities and the higher costs of delivering things such as domiciliary care. She also spoke about the importance of innovation, quality of care and being outcome-focused. She spoke glowingly about the National Centre for Rural Health and Care.

I always listen very carefully to what the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) has to say because he has done this job. He spoke about the importance of investing in prevention and said that social care must help people stay independent for longer. He admitted that this job is not quite as easy as it looks and that when he was fulfilling it, there were difficult funding decisions that had to be made. It will be no surprise to him that that continues to be the case and that nothing has changed since he left the role. It is important that he recognises that the challenges continue.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) said that innovative choices have had to be made, that there are better services that cost less in his constituency

and that the local authority has had to invest in order to save money. He did make a couple of errors, unfortunately. He mentioned that Labour councils are producing lower council tax, but everybody knows that it is actually Conservative councils that deliver better value for money, with a combination of delivering great quality services while keeping council tax lower than either Labour or the Liberal Democrats.

The hon. Members for Burnley (Julie Cooper), for Bradford West (Naz Shah), for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for Peterborough (Fiona Onasanya) all made passionate speeches, mainly about the impact of austerity on areas of deprivation.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) spoke about an innovative employment hub that has grown from the loss of the steelworks in her constituency. She spoke about the Care Academy in Cleveland, which is doing great work equipping more people for roles in adult social care. She mentioned how the challenges of caring for an ageing population are being addressed at a local level. I say to her that that is something that will have to be addressed not just at a Government level, but at a local level and a voluntary level. We all have to work together to face these challenges, which are being faced the world over.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) spoke about how important it is to have cross-party and collaborative work on this issue. We all face difficult choices. For too long, adult social care has been used as a political football. Even today, the Opposition spokeswoman talked about the dementia tax once again. That is very unhelpful language that does not help us come to a meaningful consensus or to work together.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: I will in a moment.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) asked about the important issue of sleep-in shifts. The Court of Appeal judgment last summer ruled that employers are not required to pay the national minimum wage. That has now gone to the Supreme Court, the ruling of which should give clarity to both providers and employees. The Government have taken account of the costs deriving from the national minimum wage and gave an additional £2 billion of funding to local authorities in the spring Budget of 2017. We encourage employers to pay more than the minimum wage where possible, and I recently wrote to local authorities to state my view that the judgment should not be used as an opportunity to make ad hoc changes.

Barbara Keeley *rose*—

Caroline Dinenage: I am just going to make a bit of progress.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) highlighted the difficult choices we have had to make. By painting an even bleaker picture of how things have panned out north of the border, he showed just how difficult those choices have been.

The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) spoke movingly about her constituents, Paul and Lily. She was right to highlight the very personal cases and individual stories that every single one of us comes across in our constituency casework.

If she wants to send me more details, I am happy to raise the issue with my colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions.

The population is ageing. The number of people aged 75 and over is set to double over the next 30 years, and the number of people of working age with care needs is also growing. Some of today's speakers have painted a picture of a social care system that is broken as a result of a lack of funding, but the truth is that while money is undoubtedly tight, if we are to face the challenges of an ageing population, we need to do more than just put more money in. We need a large-scale reform of the system if we are going to face the future with confidence that we can care for and support those who most need it. In the short term, we have put in around £10 billion of additional funding, but we will be bringing forward an adult social care Green Paper that will look at the long-term funding of adult social care.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that despite the Prime Minister announcing that austerity is over, local authorities' spending power per household is on course to fall by an average of 23 per cent by 2020, and that nine of the 10 most deprived council areas in this country have seen reductions that are almost three times the average of any other council under this Government; recognises that this has resulted in social care budgets in England losing £7 billion; further notes that at the last General Election Labour committed to a fully costed plan to invest an additional £8 billion in social care over this Parliament; and calls on the Government to ensure that local authorities and social care are properly and sustainably funded.

Andrew Gwynne: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am really pleased that the practice of having Opposition day debates has resumed, although it is regrettable that the Government's practice of not voting on them seems to have resumed as well. This implies Ministers' acceptance of the motion, and that they are acknowledging unfair cuts impacting on the most deprived communities and the social care crisis. What can be done to bring Ministers to the Dispatch Box, in the terms of the motion before the House today, before the local elections so that they can set out how they are going to solve the funding crisis?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Obviously, that is not a point of order, but the point that the hon. Gentleman has made is now on the record.

Business without Debate

Ordered,

That the Higher Education (Registration Fees) (England) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 543), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

PETITION

Revocation of Article 50

7.1 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The petition to revoke article 50 on the House of Commons website is by far and away the largest ever to be signed. More than 6 million people across the United Kingdom have signed it, including 15,112 residents of Glasgow North, which represents nearly 20% of the estimated constituent count. They are fed up with Brexit chaos. They want the process to stop, and they want their voices to be heard. However, I have one particular constituent who has never had an email address and therefore found herself unable to sign the petition in the way that so many others have done. She wants to make sure that her voice is also heard loud and clear, so as far as I am concerned, my presenting this petition will bring the total for Glasgow North to 15,113.

The petition states:

The petition of a resident of Glasgow North,

Declares that the government has repeatedly claimed that exiting the EU is "the will of the people"; and further that this claim is undermined by the 6,079,460 signatures on e-petition 241584 titled "Revoke article 50 and remain in the EU".

The petition therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to revoke article 50 and remain in the EU.

And the petitioner remains, etc.

[P002450]

GKN Aerospace, Kings Norton

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

7.3 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I am grateful for this opportunity to raise the case of GKN Aerospace in Kings Norton. It is a year to the day since the Business Secretary made a statement to the House to tell us that, while he would not intervene to block Melrose Industries' hostile takeover bid for GKN last year, we could all take comfort in the legally binding undertakings that the company had given him about the future. Indeed, at the time, Melrose was falling over itself to assure everyone of its commitment to manufacturing in the UK. For example, on 13 March 2018, Melrose's chief executive Simon Peckham wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, setting out particularly clearly what the company asked us to believe about its intentions. He said that the company's commitments included:

"Returning GKN to be a British manufacturing powerhouse—competitive on the global stage. Committed to innovation... Investing in skills, R&D and productivity to support the Industrial Strategy... Working with suppliers and customers to boost Britain's industrial base and the wider economy."

On 5 April, just over a year since Mr Peckham wrote that letter, workers at the GKN Aerospace plant at Kings Norton in my constituency were told what these assurances meant for them when GKN's management announced that the plant is to be run down over the next two years and closed altogether in 2021, with the loss of over 170 jobs. The company says that the work undertaken by the factory will be transferred to

"other GKN Aerospace sites or low cost areas".

By "low cost areas" we can safely assume that the company means overseas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this breach of faith cannot go unchallenged by this House or by the Minister lest every other big business that reaps the benefits of Government contracts, Government funding and Government subsidy decides that it too can go against its word and move its work to Mexico, Morocco or elsewhere? Shareholders can enjoy the benefits while our own hard-working men and women—the hon. Gentleman is a friend and a hard-working MP—wonder how to keep their homes and feed their families.

Richard Burden: The hon. Gentleman is quite right, and I thank him for his kind words. This breach of faith needs to be challenged, and I hope that the Minister will assure us that it is not only Opposition Back Benchers who are challenging the decision and that the Government will do so as well.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Although my hon. Friend says that 170 jobs will be lost, we actually have to multiply that by two or three because of the supply chain. Such figures can be utterly misleading. I am sure that my hon. Friend will recall that national security and the whole defence industry were mentioned when this matter was first debated. Despite the assurances received by Ministers, such companies have not honoured

their agreements. There is a pattern of asset stripping with this company and others, and it is about time that the Government got tough with them. The Government also need to consider national security, because I have worked in the defence industry and know what it means.

Richard Burden: My hon. Friend is right to mention national security. It was raised last year, and I will refer to it later in my speech, because GKN Aerospace Kings Norton manufactures windscreens, windows and other transparencies for both military and civilian aircraft.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important point, because this matter is not restricted to the defence industry. Asset stripping has a wider impact across our manufacturing base, and if this Government are serious about growing this country's industrial base and manufacturing capability, they had better get a grip on these matters and insist on statutory provision and legislation to back up the obligations on private capital to deliver in the national interest. Does he agree?

Richard Burden: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and I hope that we hear some strong statements from the Minister about what the Government are going to do.

Last year, not only had Melrose sought to assure the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee of its intentions, but it provided a series of similar undertakings to Ministers. In the Business Secretary's statement to the House on 24 April, one year to the day before this debate, he declared:

"I look to the management to honour its commitments in both the spirit and the letter, and to create a strong future for GKN, its employees, its suppliers, and the industrial sectors in which it will play a major role."—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 760.]

He also said:

"Melrose has also agreed to meet my officials and me every six months to provide updates on its ownership of GKN."—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 759.]

In the light of all that, one might have expected Ministers to have told the company this month that, rather than close the Kings Norton site, they expected it to honour the spirit, as well as the letter, of the undertakings it had given. Instead, in a written answer to me on 16 April, I was informed that the Secretary of State had been told that the closure plan was the result of

"an internal strategic review by GKN"

and that it was

"a commercial decision for GKN Aerospace and not in contravention of the deed of covenant agreed between BEIs and Melrose."

If Melrose has indeed been meeting the Secretary of State's officials every six months as promised, has anything been said in those meetings about the future of the Kings Norton plant being in doubt? If so, what alternatives to closure did BEIS urge on Melrose, and what was the company's response? If not, what on earth is the point of these six-monthly reviews if they are not expected to cover an issue as important as the closure of a plant?

Of course, BEIS is not the only Department with which Melrose entered a deed of covenant last year. The Business Secretary told the House that the Ministry of Defence had received undertakings that would

“prevent the disposal of the...business, components of a business or assets without the consent of the Government”.—[*Official Report*, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 759.]

The Kings Norton plant produces windscreens and windows for military as well as civilian aircraft, so can we assume that the MOD will now step in? Apparently not. A written answer from that Department on 15 April told me that, as defence work is being “moved, not stopped”, the Secretary of State for Defence would not be issuing a note of concern under the covenant.

I assume the Minister spoke to his colleagues in the MOD before this debate, so can he tell me whether GKN has made an unambiguous commitment to retain in the UK all defence-related work undertaken by the Kings Norton plant? What has GKN said about how it plans to dispose of the Kings Norton plant after closure?

No doubt the Minister will tell me about the various investments GKN has announced in its aerospace and automotive divisions at other plants in the UK, and I welcome those investments. However, the first that employees at GKN Aerospace in Kings Norton knew of the company’s plans to close their plant was when they were told on 5 April 2019. That is simply not good enough, and it is a breach of faith with what Melrose said last year.

If the company believes there is a profitability issue at Kings Norton, should not Ministers be telling it that the spirit of the undertakings given last year means that it should first discuss the situation, and the options for the future, with the trade unions representing employees before decisions are made, rather than simply informing them afterwards? When Melrose said last year that its mission is “to power” the Government’s industrial strategy to secure “the best outcomes” for employees, suppliers, customers and the wider economy, is it not reasonable to ask what assessment it has made of the impact of closing the Kings Norton plant on the local economy? My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) made that point earlier. Has BEIS asked the company that question and, if so, what has been the company’s response?

I do not believe that GKN now telling the Government it has conducted a strategic review is satisfactory. Do Ministers accept the need to press the company further? How did GKN reach this decision? What alternatives have been, or still could be, considered? What, in detail, is going to happen to the defence work carried out at Kings Norton, and how does GKN plan to dispose of the asset that is the Kings Norton plant? Finally, what impact, in practice, will closing Kings Norton have on the industrial strategy in Birmingham?

Without clear and convincing answers on those points, I ask the Minister to join me and other hon. Members in saying that Melrose and GKN should think again.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I welcome the Minister, Andrew Stephenson, on his first run out.

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to see a fellow Lancastrian in the Chair.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) on securing the debate. I pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend

the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), for all the work he has done to support UK business and industry, which I am sure he will continue to do for many years to come.

I represent the constituency of Pendle, which is home to several large aerospace businesses, so I fully appreciate the pride that the constituents of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield feel in working for a company like GKN, which can trace its roots back to 1759 and the birth of the industrial revolution. I also appreciate the impact of the loss of jobs on an area, with aerospace jobs typically paying around 43% above the national average. I greatly sympathise with the staff who will be affected by the company’s decision to close the Kings Norton site by 2021. I say that as someone whose family has a long-standing association with the aerospace sector, with three generations of my family working at Chadderton and Woodford for Avro, the firm that produced the legendary Lancaster and Vulcan aircraft. I know the pride that my family members felt in working for such a great British company, and even years after his retirement, my uncle Tom worked on projects celebrating the company’s achievements. I know that employees of GKN share a similar sense of pride in working for such a great British company, and I commend the hon. Gentleman’s dedication and passionate advocacy on behalf of his constituents.

I turn to the points raised by the hon. Gentleman. I can confirm that Melrose informed both my Department and the Ministry of Defence of the proposals to close the site on 1 April. Since then, there have been ongoing discussions between GKN and the Government on how best to support workers. He asked whether any alternatives to closing the site had been discussed. I am sure he will appreciate that this was a commercial decision for the company, but in our conversations GKN has said that it is at an early stage in the process. It has confirmed that it will do all it can to support the 172 affected employees, including providing help in seeking alternative employment both within and outside GKN.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman cannot intervene from the Front Bench.

Andrew Stephenson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As they did during the merger of GKN and Melrose, the Government continue to act to ensure that mergers result in the best outcomes for the United Kingdom. Our merger regime is a key part of the UK’s dynamic economy. Mergers and takeovers can bring great benefits to consumers and the economy. The UK has the third highest foreign direct investment stock in the world, behind the US and China. That investment means jobs in growing sectors and more opportunities to develop our skills base, and it helps companies to deliver products and services at competitive prices.

Richard Burden: It was remiss of me earlier not to welcome the Minister to his new position on the Front Bench. Can I ask him to address the question of alternatives? Frankly, saying that employees will be supported to find other jobs is not the same as asking the company whether it has looked at alternatives to closure. Has that question been asked, and what was the

[Richard Burden]

result? Is he not rather worried that nothing was apparently said about any of this in the Department's last six-monthly review with Melrose?

Andrew Stephenson: The company has emphasised to us that it is at a very early stage in the process. It has not started formal consultation with workers, but it thought it was appropriate to set out its long-term vision for the site. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and others who meet the company will discuss alternatives to the site, and I hope that we can work together to support the 172 workers who are directly affected and those in the supply chain who will also be affected.

I fully appreciate the hon. Gentleman's opposition to the takeover, which he set out today and in a debate in Westminster Hall on 15 March last year. I also understand the concerns that have been raised this evening by the hon. Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). However, I emphasise that mergers are an important part of our economy, and they can bring real benefits to consumers and the economy as a whole by attracting investment and promoting growth and innovation.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister is making a fair point about the potential for mergers and takeovers to be positive. He also mentioned foreign direct investment, but does he recognise that there are two types of foreign direct investment—developmental and dependent—and that the bulk of the FDI activity in the UK is dependent? It involves purchasing existing UK-owned assets and does not add to the overall capital stock of the economy or grow the economy in a sustainable way. Does the Minister recognise that that is a big flaw in the Government's industrial policy? If he recognises that, perhaps he will start to deal with it.

Andrew Stephenson: No, I think foreign direct investment is a power for good in our economy, and we should work to attract more investment into the economy. Some of our best firms have grown through mergers and acquisitions, and we have seen huge investments in different sectors with the help of foreign direct investment. It is worth saying at this point that GKN has grown through mergers and takeovers, both here and abroad. I think the firm actually bought the site from Pilkington in 2003.

The UK's merger regime is highly regarded around the world because of how it is designed. It is based on transparent rules that are administered consistently by expert bodies. It recognises that decisions are primarily a matter for the shareholders and restricts the role of Ministers to transactions that raise public interest concerns. As a result, the regime offers clarity for businesses and maintains investor confidence. An example of that is the independent Takeover Panel, which governs the takeover code. The code provides a robust framework to ensure that takeovers of listed companies are conducted in an orderly manner, with fair treatment of all shareholders.

On 12 January 2018, GKN announced that Melrose had made a takeover approach and the Secretary of State spoke to both parties to understand their intentions. The Government's priority was to ensure that the national security concerns raised by the transaction were addressed.

The Government completed a thorough and detailed assessment and concluded that they should not intervene under the Enterprise Act 2002.

Melrose voluntarily agreed post-offer undertakings with the Takeover Panel. As a result, for a period of five years, Melrose committed to sustain GKN's current level of expensed research and development at 2.2% of sales; maintain a UK stock exchange listing; remain headquartered in the UK and ensure that the majority of directors are UK resident; and guarantee that both the aerospace and Driveline divisions retain the rights to the GKN name. In addition, Melrose agreed to sign a deed in favour of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that commits the company not to sell the core aerospace business before 1 April 2023 without the Secretary of State's consent.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I welcome the Minister to the Front Bench—I should have said that earlier. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), he indicated that he has had discussions with the Ministry of Defence about the current situation. What was the MOD's view?

Andrew Stephenson: The MOD shares my Department's view that these job losses and this closure are highly regrettable but do not contravene the terms of the deed and the undertakings made during the takeover. Melrose agreed a deed with the MOD that includes clear obligations and commitments to maintain capacity and to support certain military goods, and requires that the Secretary of State for Defence be notified if Melrose plans to transfer production outside the UK. Melrose also made commitments to invest in skills and innovation, support sector deals, and support the supply chain during its ownership of the business.

Since the transaction completed, the Government have been monitoring Melrose's compliance with the terms of the deal. My officials had a meeting with the company in October 2018 and will meet it again next month. Furthermore, on 1 April Melrose publicly reported that it is in compliance with the post-offer undertakings as required by the Takeover Panel. We are currently content that Melrose is compliant with the commitments that it made to the Government. Although GKN Aerospace's decision is a huge disappointment for both the Government and the 172 staff members who will be affected, it does not contravene the commitments that were made at the time of the takeover.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield asked whether I had spoken to my colleagues in the Ministry of Defence; I have spoken to the Defence Procurement Minister, and he confirmed that they are content that Melrose has complied with its requirement under the deed with the MOD.

Prior to the Melrose bid, GKN had itself planned to restructure the business, which could have resulted in job losses, and intended to sell the entire automotive division to the US company Dana, which likewise might have decided to close UK manufacturing sites. The Secretary of State spoke to GKN Aerospace's chief executive officer, Hans Büthker, and he informed us that the announcement does not in any way reflect a reduction in growth by the company. In fact, he said it is quite the opposite: the decision is the result of an internal strategic review by GKN to invest in high-value technology-driven production. That same review proposes to invest more in other UK sites.

I understand that a meeting has now been arranged between the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield, the Secretary of State and the CEO of GKN Aerospace for further discussions on the matter, including on how we can best support his constituents who work at the site. I hope that will be an opportunity to discuss and explore alternatives to the site, and that that is something the hon. Gentleman can take forward from this debate.

As I mentioned earlier, GKN has confirmed that it will be doing all that it can to support the affected employees. We will continue to work closely with the company, the unions, the local enterprise partnership, the Mayor of the West Midlands Combined Authority, Andy Street, and councils to help with this effort and ensure that each and every worker is fully supported in finding new work.

Aerospace is one of our most rapidly expanding sectors and skilled and experienced employees are in strong demand. The UK aerospace sector is a great success story, and we punch well above our weight on the world stage. We are a world leader in the design, manufacture and maintenance of some of the most complex and high-value components of an aircraft, including the wings, engines, aerostructures and advanced systems. Our industry turns over £39 billion a year and the vast majority of what we make in the UK is exported globally.

Around half of the world's modern passenger aircraft have wings designed and built here in the UK, and GKN Aerospace-manufactured products are on more than 100,000 flights a day. The hon. Gentleman asked what impact the closing of the Kings Norton site will have on the industrial strategy in Birmingham. Yesterday, I attended a meeting alongside five of my ministerial colleagues to discuss the midlands engine and the progress of our west midlands local industrial strategy. This will set out an ambitious long-term vision for the west midlands economy to increase productivity, drive economic growth, and support manufacturing and technology in both Birmingham and the wider region.

The midlands has long been renowned as a hub for manufacturing, and it is not short of opportunities for advanced engineering jobs. More than a third of the UK's automotive sector employment is in the midlands, and the region boasts many globally recognised companies, including Jaguar Land Rover, JCB and Rolls-Royce. More widely, the midlands is also home to the Manufacturing Technology Centre in Coventry, which operates some of the most advanced manufacturing equipment in the world.

The past year has seen the largest GKN Aerospace UK technology investment since 2012. This includes the announcement of a £32 million UK Global Technology Centre in Bristol and the large investments made to support its additive manufacturing capabilities in the UK—both have been supported by the Government through co-funded research and development grants. This co-funded investment will support GKN's growth in the UK and will help safeguard and create high-value jobs in the company and its supply chain.

Hon. Members will be pleased to hear that GKN has also confirmed to us that there will be further investment at some of its other UK sites, including those in Luton and Portsmouth, which will soon become technology centres of excellence. This comes on top of GKN's recent announcement of £300 million in new investment to ramp up its activities in the fast-growing market for electric vehicles, something that I am sure the hon. Gentleman, as chairman of the all-party motor group, will welcome.

I can assure hon. Members that the Government will continue to support those affected by this site closure in the years ahead. Finally, I thank the hon. Gentleman again for giving the House the opportunity to debate this important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 24 April 2019

[MRS MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

Russian Annexation of Crimea

9.30 am

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Russian annexation of Crimea.

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

It was a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, however briefly, and it is a great pleasure to serve under yours, Mr Davies. 18 March 2019 was the fifth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea. It is worth stopping at this point to dwell on the fact that Russia has been allowed to annex Crimea for five years, to carry out military activities in the Donbass, and also to invade two enclaves of Georgia. As I said in my speech in this Chamber in July last year,

"we are dealing with a serial offender."—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 102WH.]

I will first detail what happened five years ago, move on to the impact of the illegal annexation, then finally examine the current situation in the Azov sea.

On 20 February 2014, Russia's "little green men"—military without insignia—started the occupation of the Crimean peninsula. That began the process of annexation, as soldiers wearing Russian combat fatigues and carrying Russian weapons began seizing important institutions in the peninsula. Russia initially denied that those were Russian soldiers, but later said that they were. As a result of that annexation, a range of sanctions was imposed on Russia by the EU, the US and allies, including economic sanctions such as restrictions on access to financial markets; an arms embargo; restrictions on the export of oil extraction technology; targeted sanctions against certain individuals; and diplomatic sanctions, including exclusion from the G8 and the suspension of voting rights in the Council of Europe. I will return to that last point towards the end of my speech.

The Foreign Secretary has said:

"I condemn the illegal annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol...five years ago. The UK will never recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and we call on Russia to end their illegitimate control of the peninsula and their attempts to redraw the boundaries of Europe."

Ambassador Jonathan Allen, who was the UK deputy permanent representative to the UN, has said:

"Russia's aggression towards Ukraine is not limited to the Donbas and Crimea—Russia seeks to undermine Ukraine at every opportunity...supplying the Russian-backed separatists with weapons and calling illegitimate elections—all in breach of the Minsk agreement.

Only this year, in a written answer in the other place, Lord Ahmad said:

"Sanctions imposed alongside our international partners, including the US, in 2014 have had a coordinated impact on Russia by increasing economic pressure to change its Ukraine policy and

sending a clear, united message that Russian aggression in Ukraine will not be tolerated. This impact has been strengthened by the continuation and maintenance of 2014 sanctions since their implementation."

There has been widespread condemnation by the UK of Russia's activities, and it is good to see that strong line continuing.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on the beginning of his speech, which is superb. Does he agree that part of the problem with Russian aggression, and the boldness with which Russia has acted in Ukraine, has been the lack of a proper and effective response when Russia moved into South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia?

John Howell: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Many reasons have been given as to why Russia annexed Crimea, one of which is that keeping Ukraine at war prevents it from joining NATO. That goes beyond being a conspiracy theory; it is something we ought to recognise.

On 16 March 2014, Russia organised a sham referendum in Crimea. That referendum was followed on 18 March 2014 by the so-called agreement on the accession of the Republic of Crimea to the Russian Federation. Voters were not given the chance to choose the status quo in that referendum, which was conducted in polling stations under armed guard. That violated Ukraine's constitution and international law. It is claimed that 97% voted to join Russia, and according to Russian official results, that was on a turnout of 87%. However, it is interesting that later, a member of the Russian human rights council mistakenly posted the real election results, showing that only 55% had voted to join Russia on a turnout of 40%—a very significant difference.

The UN General Assembly produced two resolutions; I understand that we co-sponsored one. Those resolutions called on states and international organisations not to recognise any change in Crimea's status, and affirmed the commitment of the United Nations to recognise Crimea as part of Ukraine. The referendum also violated, among other agreements, the 1994 Budapest memorandum on security assurances for Ukraine. Under that agreement, Ukraine gave up the nuclear weapons that were on its territory in exchange for independence and undertakings given by Russia.

There is no precise data on what effect the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia has had, but a quick calculation shows that Ukraine has been robbed of the following assets: 3.6% of GDP; 4,000 enterprises; 10% of port infrastructure; 80% of oil and gas deposits; and 70% of potential natural gas deposits in the Black sea.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): My hon. Friend is painting a very bleak picture, but in his introduction, he mentioned sanctions applied to Russia by the United States, the European Union and other allies. Do we have any measure of how effective those sanctions have been?

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Interestingly, in the other place, Lord Ahmad said that those sanctions had been very good at sending a clear and united message that Russian aggression in Ukraine would not be tolerated. However, I am not sure that they have had that much effect in practice: for example,

[John Howell]

Russia has been able to get round the arms embargo. The only sanction that has had some impact on the state of Russia has been the measure to deprive it of access to the financial markets in London and elsewhere.

I will now examine the impact on Ukraine of the annexation of Crimea, and will first deal with the illegal imposition of Russian law. Contrary to its obligations as an occupying power under the fourth Geneva convention, Russia has imposed its legislation in the occupied territory of Crimea. What is extremely dangerous is that Russian laws have been applied retroactively to acts and events that took place in Crimea prior to its occupation. This is not a dry legal debate; it has severe implications for the people of Crimea. For example, the policy of automatic naturalisation means that all Ukrainian citizens who remained in the occupied territory have had Russian citizenship forcibly imposed on them, which is a big change for them. Moreover, Russia's occupation and purported annexation of Crimea complicated the question of citizenship for children born after February 2014, since it is difficult for parents to register a child as a citizen with the Ukrainian authorities. Eight campaigns conscripting Crimean residents into the Russian Federation armed forces have been held since the beginning of the occupation. During the latest campaign, which ended in December 2018, approximately 2,800 men from Crimea were enlisted, bringing the overall number of Crimean conscripts to almost 15,000. As draft evasion is punishable under Russian criminal law by up to two years in prison, Crimean citizens are de facto forced to enter the Russian armed forces.

The atmosphere of fear, intimidation and physical and psychological pressure has forced 35,000 to 40,000 Ukrainian citizens, including an enormous number of Crimean Tatars, to leave Crimea and settle in other areas of Ukraine. The 2018 human rights report by the US Department of State states that the actual number could be as high as 100,000, as many remained unregistered. To replace those who left the peninsula, up to 1 million Russians have been brought in from Russia and resettled in Crimea.

Religious freedom has also been compromised, with 38 parishes administered by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine closing down in the occupied Crimea. Eight parishes of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine remain on the peninsula, but they have been constantly targeted by the occupying authorities since Russia seized control. It is not just individual churches that are affected. Russia has launched legal proceedings to seize the land where the only Orthodox Church of Ukraine cathedral in Crimea is located. Mosques and the Jewish community have been targeted, too. In March 2014, Reform Rabbi Mikhail Kapustin of Simferopol was forced to leave Crimea after denouncing Russian actions. His synagogue had been defaced by a swastika and, a month later, vandals defaced Sevastopol's monument to 4,200 Jews killed by the Nazis in July 1942.

Russia has set out systematically to eliminate Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian languages and culture. No schools are now left in Crimea with a curriculum entirely in Ukrainian and Crimean languages. Contrary to the 2017 order of the International Court of Justice, which requests that Russia ensure the availability of education

in the Ukrainian language, the number of children studying in Ukrainian has decreased from 14,000 in 2013-14 to 172 in the 2017-18 school year.

Russia has banned the highest representative body of Crimean Tatars—the Mejlis—under false allegations of extremist activity. Despite the clear meaning of the 2017 International Court of Justice order to

“refrain, pending the final decision in the case, from maintaining or imposing limitations on the ability of the Crimean Tatar community to conserve its representative institutions”,

two years have passed and Russia continues to maintain its ban. Members of the indigenous Crimean Tatar minority, many of whom vocally oppose the Russian occupation, have faced particularly acute repression by the authorities. In 2018, 367 infringements of the right to a fair trial were registered. More than 90 people, mostly Crimean Tatars, have been detained and/or sentenced under politically motivated charges, with some being transferred into Russia across an internationally recognised border. In detention centres, they are being mistreated and tortured as punishment or to extort confessions.

On 12 December 2018, Russia detained the amputee Crimean Tatar, Edem Bekirov. He has diabetes and four shunts in his heart. Since then, he has been denied urgently needed medical care. He now has an infection in the open wound where his leg was amputated. He is not allowed to go outdoors. His blood sugar level and blood pressure have gone up. He sleeps in a sitting position. The Russian FSB rejects his alibi in favour of a secret witness. Recently his detention was extended until June.

From 2014 to 30 June 2018, 42 people were victims of enforced disappearances, including 27 ethnic Ukrainians and nine Crimean Tatars. It is believed that Russian security forces kidnapped individuals for opposing Russia's occupation to instil fear in the population and prevent dissent. The Russian occupation continues to deny access to international human rights monitors to Crimea—access that is in line with United Nations resolutions.

Ukrainian cultural heritage is also under threat. One very big world heritage landmark and four landmarks submitted for consideration to UNESCO are located in the occupied territory. Having illegally announced the right of ownership for 32 historical buildings of the Khan's Palace array, the Russian occupying power has undertaken an unprofessional and incompetent reconstruction. That may seem insignificant in comparison with the life of the individual suffering from diabetes, but it has a personal association for me, as I was an archaeologist before I came into the House and it is sad to see such things happening. The removing of valuable cultural artefacts from Crimean museums to Russia continues.

That is as nothing compared with the Russian militarisation of the peninsula, which has continued at pace. Russia has substantially reinforced and modernised its Crimean military land, air and naval components. The militarisation of Crimea is a threat not only to Ukraine, but to the security of the whole of Europe. At any moment Russia can provoke a military conflict in the Black sea region with NATO.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Change UK): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is a fellow member of the Council of Europe delegation. I have been to Ukraine three times in the past few weeks

to monitor the election process, and I was privileged to witness the peaceful transfer of power on Sunday. In many ways and to most people's minds, it was a rather unexpected democratic change in Ukraine. Does he agree that that is something to celebrate? There is clear evidence that the Ukrainian people are embracing the democratic path to change. Ukraine is embracing democratic values. On that basis alone, should we not continue to fully support the country in its assertion of its territorial integrity?

John Howell: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work with us on the Council of Europe. She makes a very good point. It would be so easy for Ukraine, when it is threatened with Russian annexation and military activity in Donbass, to take a very restrictive attitude to the conduct of elections and what they can achieve, but it has not. It has had full democratic elections that have produced a startling change. She is right that we should compliment Ukraine on that election and do all we can to support it.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): My hon. Friend has rightly set out a litany of sad human rights abuses and cultural vandalism—not only in Crimea and Donbass, but in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, too. Volodymyr Zelensky said in his campaign that he would not see Crimea exchanged for peace in Donbass. Does my hon. Friend agree that he needs to hold fast to that pre-election commitment? When he becomes President in the next couple of weeks, he needs to be robust with Russia and work along with western partners, which was another commitment he made. In seeking peace, he should not seek peace at any cost.

John Howell: I agree. I think we have all looked at the results of the Ukrainian elections with a degree of caution as to what the attitude of the new President will be, but this is not a time to back down from the demands being made for the restoration of Crimea and for an end to the fighting in the Donbass. This is a time for allies to keep making and pushing that point strongly.

Since 2014, Russia has increased the number of troops in occupied Crimea by three times. Armoured vehicles have been increased by five times; artillery by 10 times; jets by five times; and multiple launch rocket systems by 10 times. Most recently, Russia has deployed four battalions of S-400 Triumf missile systems in Crimea, which allows it to cover all of the Black sea, the Azov sea area and most of Ukraine. The Russian Black sea fleet can now fire in a single shot 86 Kalibr, known as “Sizzler”, nuclear-capable missiles, able to reach not only Kiev but other EU capitals.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is giving an amazing speech - a real grounding in the problems faced across the region since the annexation of Crimea. This is not just a problem for Ukraine; as he said earlier, it is a problem for the whole of Europe. He is right about the weapons increase, but the real live-fire risk, towards Europe in particular and against Ukraine on a regular basis, is cyber-attacks.

The NotPetya attack cost the world economy \$10 billion. Unless we also pay attention to sandboxing, the cyber-weapons that have been targeted on Ukraine, its infrastructure, airports, utilities and banks, will turn on Europe. They have been demonstrated to be lethal and will start attacking us, particularly as European elections loom.

John Howell: The hon. Lady makes a valid point. I do not underestimate the effect of Russian cyber-attacks not only on Ukraine, but on the whole of Europe. I am not sure what we can do about them, except to make sure that we are strong in resisting them. She has highlighted the key point: that the issue affects all of us. Once an attack has been launched on Ukraine, it can affect the rest of Europe.

What are we to make of the actions of the Council of Europe, which has now produced a motion that makes it easier for Russia to return by not having the credentials of its members challenged? The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has not suspended Russia; the decision was taken by Russia in 2015 not to present credentials for its own delegation in response to voting restrictions placed on it by PACE following the illegal annexation of Crimea.

The UK is clear that a Russian return to PACE would be contingent on the withdrawal of all Russian military personnel and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, as well as an end to the illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula. I urge the Minister to reject or at least heavily modify the recent recommendation from PACE, which is coming his way as part of the Committee of Ministers and which liberalises the PACE approach.

Angela Smith: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Does he not agree with me that the credibility of PACE and all the institutions of the Council of Europe is at stake here? It will be very difficult for bodies such as the Venice Commission to go into Ukraine and recommend legal reform if the Council of Europe is seen to be giving way to Russian threats to withdraw financial support for the institution.

John Howell: I agree. At the previous meeting of the Council of Europe, I moved what seemed like countless amendments to try to make the report that had been produced much better. Unfortunately, they were all defeated, although I pay great compliments to one of our Ukrainian colleagues, Serhii Kiral, who led a brilliant campaign with us at various times during the Council's proceedings. I agree with the hon. Lady that the credibility of the whole organisation is affected.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): As president of the European Conservatives Group, of which Serhii Kiral is a member, I want to echo my hon. Friend's sentiments that he did a phenomenal job. Also, the Ukraine delegation in the Council of Europe, regardless of party—socialists or whatever—are a formidable bunch of characters who really do credit to their nation under the most difficult circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribbles Valley (Mr Evans) is not in his place at the moment, but at the Inter-Parliamentary Union we have had to separate the Russians and Ukrainians because of provocation. The work that the Ukraine delegations do has been remarkable. I pay tribute to Serhii Kiral.

John Howell: I thank my hon. Friend for that tribute, and I agree with it. The Ukrainian delegations have been absolutely fantastic, regardless of politics. They have all stood as one in the Council of Europe and it has been a great pleasure to work with them.

[John Howell]

Finally, I turn to the situation in the Azov sea. Stability remains elusive in eastern Ukraine, and Russia has moved to shore up its hold on Crimea. Russia has built a bridge across the Kerch strait, connecting Crimea to Russia. On 25 November 2018, Russian border patrol ships attacked and seized three Ukrainian navy vessels attempting to enter the sea of Azov from the Black sea through the Kerch strait, in a move that looked designed to gain complete control of the sea of Azov.

In December, suspicions that Russia has nuclear arms in Crimea were reported. Such developments suggest that, although the conflict in the eastern mainland regions of Ukraine may be resolved, Russia does not intend to restore Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea. I am worried that succour may be given to the views I heard coming out of various organisations that both sides in the conflict are to blame. They are not. This is naked Russian aggression. The bridge breaches Ukrainian sovereignty—a particularly dangerous development that we need to condemn.

For all those reasons, the Secretary of State for Defence made a visit to Ukraine before Christmas and we sent a naval vessel to the area—not quite a harking back to gunboat diplomacy, but nevertheless a move that certainly sent a great deal of patriotism through some people's blood. It was meant to send a clear signal to Russia that we will stand by Ukraine, rather than being an act of further provocation.

I understand that we intend to send other Royal Navy ships to provide a more constant British presence. To our Ukrainian friends, I say, "We will support you. I hope that you take that in the intended spirit." This is a terrible tale of a big country throwing its weight around to the detriment of a country which, as its role in the Council of Europe shows, is playing a full part in western culture while retaining its own identity. This is not a good situation. It has made Europe much more prone to instability and increased conflict. I look forward to the Minister's comments and his continuing commitment to trying to ensure that Russia withdraws from Crimea.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. We have five speakers, and half an hour. I call Chris Bryant.

9.59 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Davies. I warmly commend the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for introducing the debate, which is both timely and important. I gather that a joke is going round in Moscow these days: President Putin is asking General Secretary Stalin for advice on what he should do politically, and Stalin says, "You should execute all members of the Government and paint the Kremlin blue." Putin replies, "Why blue?" and Stalin says, "I thought that was the only part you would query." Perhaps there is some exaggeration in the joke, but perhaps there is some truth as well.

The point that the hon. Member for Henley, and others who have been on the delegation with him, made very clearly, and which I am sure the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who is a known expert on the subject of Ukraine, will make as well, is that the annexation was illegal, full stop—end of story, in a

sense. That is, of course, contested by the Russian Federation, but under any judgment of international law, it is clear that the annexation of Crimea was illegal.

As the hon. Member for Henley said, it followed on from other annexations, attempted annexations or invasions that were also illegal. I warmly commended David Cameron for going to Georgia, as one of his first acts as Conservative leader, to stand with the Georgian people and say that the invasions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia were illegal acts. Unfortunately, the agreement that was subsequently signed with President Sarkozy has still not been implemented. There are still Russian troops in Georgia and, as has been laid out today, the problems in relation to Crimea grow day by day.

The truth of the matter is that the annexation would not have happened had the Russian Federation not signed up to the Budapest memorandum, because Ukraine would have had nuclear weapons. In that accord, the Russian Federation guaranteed the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including Crimea as part of Ukraine, so there is understandable cynicism and scepticism. I do not know what the highest level of cynicism and scepticism that one can have is, but that is what the international community shares regarding any international treaties signed by the Russian Federation under President Putin.

Many have drawn comparisons with the situation in the 1930s. Such comparisons are important to bear in mind, though it would be wrong to make a direct comparison between Putin and Hitler, because their ideologies were fundamentally different. However, their nationalism and deliberate attempts to use violence to secure their aims probably amounted to the same.

In 1938, the German Chancellor was determined to persuade the international community that he would seize only the Sudetenland—the part of Czechoslovakia that, in his words, was dominated by German-speaking German nationals. In fact, by seizing the Sudetenland he undermined the whole of the rest of Czechoslovakia and made it impossible for it to survive as a nation state. I think that is exactly the intention of the Russian Federation in relation to Ukraine. In the 1930s, British politicians did not really care; they thought that Hitler sort of had a point. Politicians in the UK have also said that President Putin sort of has a point about Crimea, because a lot of the people in Crimea are Russian and identify as Russian speakers. However, that is wholly to miss the point that there has been a deliberate process of political destabilisation in Ukraine that went on for a considerable number of years. As the hon. Member for Henley said, it included a fake referendum that was deliberately engineered. The results were falsely counted, and an incorrect version of them was given out.

Mrs Moon: One of the most important things that we must focus on is the softening-up period before invasion takes place. There is a deliberate disinformation campaign targeted at the Russian-speaking populations, not just in Georgia and Ukraine but on a daily basis in the Baltic states. Such disinformation prepares an expectation among the Russian-speaking population that change is coming, and that they should support it. Is that something to which we should also pay attention?

Chris Bryant: I commend my hon. Friend. She is right, and that is one of the reasons why I am particularly anxious that we, as a political class in this country, have

seemingly decided that we are not all that interested in Russian interference in our elections and electoral processes. I think that we will rue the day in the end. We need to be extremely careful, because we have seen what the Russian Federation has managed to do through cyber-warfare in other countries around the world, and continues to do in Ukraine, because it wants to soften up the rest of the country.

The process of misinformation continues. The latest version of that is the Russian Federation maintaining that Crimea lost 1.5 trillion roubles during the 25 years that it was part of Ukraine. Many would argue that the loss to Crimea is from being taken out of Ukraine. Russian spokespeople do not half have a cheek sometimes.

There is another clear aspect to the annexation. In 1938, Hitler wanted to seize the Skoda factory, which was one of the most productive factories in Europe, and turn it into an arms manufacturer; it was soon making Panzers for the Wehrmacht. Just so, Putin has had his eye for a considerable period on not only the natural resources in Crimea but the ports, which are vital to any future military intentions that he may have. It is all part of a pattern; President Putin always has a tendency to resort to violent options when they are available to him.

Putin was, of course, in political trouble in his own country when the annexation commenced, and it was extremely popular, re-enhancing that nationalist sense in Russian politics. In large measure, one can see the reinvention of Putin as a nationalist hero, in Russian terms, on the back of the annexation of Crimea. There is a sense of political doldrums in the Russian Federation, because Putin clearly has no idea who his successor should be or where the future should lie. He is kind of bored with governing Russia, which potentially makes for a very dangerous time for the international community.

The Government need to be careful about key issues of UK policy. We have referred already to sanctions policy. As I have said to the Minister many times, I fear that the Government are still dragging their heels—he will say that they are not—on implementing a full set of secure sanctions in relation to individuals who have committed human rights abuses in the Russian Federation and Crimea. I think that the Russians have noticed that that has not yet happened, and that other countries have moved faster. It is time that we proceeded faster. I am sure that the Minister will say that the Government are doing their best, and that it will all happen in the fullness of time, but I am not convinced.

Secondly, there was a time when the UK led within the European Union on trying to bind Ukraine into the international community, and on standing up for it in international affairs. That will be more difficult in the future when/if we are no longer a member of the European Union. I wish to know how we will achieve that in the future. I hope that the UK has made strong representations to the United States of America that one cannot oppose annexation in Crimea and support it in the Golan Heights. Annexation is annexation. One cannot simply turn a blind eye because it involves a big ally on one side of the Atlantic, rather than a country that one wants to criticise on the other.

Finally, we of course wish Mr Zelensky, who has been elected, well. It is difficult to see exactly how things will play out. I very much hope that the UK will want to extend a warm hand, to ensure that he ends up on the right side of the argument.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. We have about 20 minutes and four speakers, which makes five minutes per speaker. I call Mr Whittingdale.

10.9 am

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this debate at an extremely important time for Ukraine, and on doing an excellent job of setting out the facts about the Russian occupation of Crimea.

Like the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), three weeks ago I spent my Sunday sitting in a polling station in Desnianskyi district, a poorer suburb of Kiev, and this Sunday I was in a polling station in Bucha, watching democracy in action. It is always inspiring to see a democratic election in a country that has only recently become free.

One of the striking things about the Ukraine election was that there was absolutely no question about the people's desire for change. As overseas observers, we had some criticisms about access to the media, financing and resources, but there can be no doubt that the result—the election of President-elect Zelensky—reflects the will of the Ukrainian people. I pay tribute to President Poroshenko, who I think achieved many things, but there is a real and deep-seated wish for change, and it was undoubtedly a genuine election.

One of the first things that President-elect Zelensky will have to do is decide how best to confront the Russian aggression and the occupation of parts of his country. The war in Donbass gets a lot of attention—it is a hot war and people are dying there; I went last year to Avdiivka, which is right up against the frontline and is regularly subject to shelling—but we must not overlook Crimea, which has spent five years under occupation.

President-elect Zelensky has not yet said a great deal about his policy, and we must wait to see who he will appoint to key positions such as Foreign Minister, but he has referred to the Budapest memorandum. The signatories to that memorandum—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley rightly drew attention to the fact that the UK is one—have said that they will protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. The Ukrainians have an expectation that that commitment will be honoured, even though one of the signatories is responsible for the invasion and occupation of their country. I know that our Government want to pursue the existing dialogue with Russia through the Normandy agreement and the Minsk process, but President-elect Zelensky has said that he sees a role for the Budapest signatories, so if he approaches the UK Government to assist in resolving the situation, I hope that they will respond positively.

My hon. Friend made several points about the invasion of Crimea five years ago; I do not want to repeat them, but I will make a couple of observations. One of the reasons given for the invasion was that, following the revolution of dignity in the Maidan, Kiev was under the control of a fascist and antisemitic Government. Ironically, not only is there no evidence of that Government ever being fascist or antisemitic, but as of Sunday, Ukraine will be only the second country in the whole world, after Israel, to have a President and a Prime Minister who are both Jewish.

[Mr John Whittingdale]

The second reason given for the invasion was the referendum in which the occupants of Crimea expressed a wish to rejoin Russia. It is true that in 1990, when there were genuine plebiscites across Ukraine to determine its future, the biggest minority in favour of joining Russia was in Crimea, although it was only 41%. However, the so-called referendum that took place five years ago did so under the barrels of Kalashnikovs after all media from Ukraine had been cut off. There was a relentless barrage of Russian propaganda, including footage that showed thousands of Ukrainians allegedly fleeing from what the Russian Foreign Ministry described as threats of a massacre—I say “allegedly” because it subsequently emerged that it was footage of a traffic jam of Ukrainian vehicles heading across the border to Poland to do some weekend shopping.

The referendum offered a choice between joining Russia immediately and retaining independence with the right to join Russia after a specified period. Remaining part of Ukraine was not on the ballot paper. Just imagine if a similar question had been asked in our EU referendum three years ago. As my hon. Friend said, the referendum on joining Russia rightly received international condemnation, including by the United Nations General Assembly; resolutions have been passed that point out that the annexation and occupation continue to be illegal.

My hon. Friend was right to highlight the relentless abuse of human rights in Crimea since the Russian occupation. I draw particular attention to the events of 27 March, less than four weeks ago, in which 23 Crimean Tatar civic journalists were arrested, beaten by the Russian FSB and taken out of Crimea. It is not clear where some of them are being held; I am afraid that they are just the latest in a long list of people, particularly Tatars, who have been subjected to torture, abuse, kidnapping and imprisonment.

My hon. Friend rightly referred to the military build-up in Crimea since the Russians took over. There was already a naval base at Sevastopol, of course, but before the occupation there were only 12,500 Russian troops there, whereas there are now estimated to be 32,000. There has also been a build-up of aircraft, naval forces and military vehicles; indeed, it is now reported that there may well be nuclear weapons in Crimea, which is ironic given that the Budapest memorandum was signed specifically in return for Ukraine's agreement to give up its nuclear weapons.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the situation in the sea of Azov. Just before Christmas, I travelled to Berdyansk and Mariupol, which are both on the sea of Azov, to see the effect of the blockade across the Kerch strait. The bridge that was built prevents a large number of larger ships from entering the sea of Azov, and since the blockade Russian warships have imposed checks on all ships going in. That has had the effect of delaying passage and rendering the businesses of Mariupol and Berdyansk almost uneconomic. Those two cities are subject to economic warfare and must be relieved.

My hon. Friend was right to say that the Ukrainians have done a fantastic job of raising these issues in every international forum. He spoke about his and his colleagues' work in the Council of Europe; at the annual Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly some 10 days ago, I

listened to a very powerful address by Mr Parubiy, the Speaker of the Ukrainian Rada. It was then countered by the Russians, who said that of course there were no Russians whatever in Donbass and that there never had been—it was an entire fiction. There is an absolute denial of reality by Russia, despite overwhelming evidence.

I pay tribute to the representation of Ukraine in this country. It is a great pleasure to see the Ukrainian ambassador, Her Excellency Natalia Galibarenko, listening to this debate. She is an assiduous attender of such events and does a fantastic job.

My hon. Friend spoke about the need to increase the pressure on Russia, particularly through sanctions. I agree absolutely that it was very important that we passed the Magnitsky amendment. We eagerly await its implementation; I know that the Government intend to move forward, but we would like them to do so somewhat quicker.

I hope that the message that comes out from this debate, and the number of speakers in it, will demonstrate that across the House of Commons there is unanimous support for Ukraine against the illegal occupation of part of the country and the aggressive action of the Russian Federation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. We have 12 minutes for the remaining three Back-Bench speakers, which means an advisory time limit of four minutes each.

10.18 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies.

It is quite unbelievable that the events in the Maidan, in which hundreds of peaceful protesters were murdered by the Yanukovich regime, happened only five years ago, because the sequence of events that his flight to Russia set in motion have changed so much. As for the justifications for the invasion, the most prominent of which seems to have been the idea that Crimea was somehow being returned to the Russian Federation, it is as if the decision of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in 1954 was some sort of bureaucratic error that could be corrected only by the application of blunt military force.

The point was well put by the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), whom I thank for securing this debate: the invasion had less to do with the rights of Russophone Ukrainians living in Crimea than with the most brutal of geostrategic realities, namely that Russia needs a Black sea port, its “place in the sun”, just as much now as when Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of All the Russias first annexed it for her Empire in 1784. One could equally say that the presence of Ionian colonists in the 7th century BC means that it should be made an outpost of the Hellenic Republic. If it were predicated on the rights and needs of the people who live there, the Russian Government's record of maltreatment towards those people would not be so prominent, which is a point that was well put by the hon. Member for Henley in his discussion of the Tatars.

The only extremism we have seen in Crimea is the clampdown on ethnic and religious freedoms enjoyed by the residents of what is a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional

place. Just as Crimea's Tatar population has seen persecution, so has the Ukrainian-language community, with the closure of several Ukrainian Orthodox churches, and the arrest of Archbishop Klyment last month, and the persecution of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. This attack on the most basic rights and democracy in Crimea leads me to my last point, and I hope hon. Members will allow me to indulge in a little introspection.

The Russian invasion of Crimea was followed by a referendum that fraudulently stated that 97% of participants had voted to be subsumed into the Russian Federation, although the real number was closer to 55%, and there was open intimidation at polling stations, so many would be forgiven for not taking part. As someone who has campaigned for the independence of my own country all my adult life and saw the independence referendum in Scotland as a final point in a democratic process that should be held up as the gold standard for this type of constitutional referendum, I say that that standard was not even close to being met in Crimea. Colleagues agreed and disagreed with me during the Scottish referendum, but we all agreed on the process. That was not true in the case of Crimea. Furthermore, when my country does become independent, it will not be to the detriment of the rights and lives of my fellow Scots.

I ask the Government of the Russian Federation to have the courage of their convictions. If the principle of self-determination is so important to them, why do they not extend it to their own subjects and allow status referendums inside the Russian Federation? I am sure the Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvashs, Chechens, Avars, Udmurts, Dargins, Tuvans, Ossetians and Kalmyks, among others, would be delighted to be asked about their participation in the Russian Federation. To begin with, I would settle for Russia returning Crimea to Ukraine and withdrawing its forces and military completely.

I pay tribute to the recent electoral process in Ukraine and I thank the ambassador, who is in the Public Gallery today, for the commendable work that she does across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in promoting peace and democracy within the Ukrainian state.

10.22 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) is the most assiduous of members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and I am delighted that he secured this debate. I am also very pleased, as the leader of the delegation, to have seen so many hon. Friends from that delegation here this morning.

I ask the Minister specifically to address the situation that currently faces the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley was absolutely right when he said that, following the annexation of Crimea, the Assembly suspended certain voting rights for the Russian Federation's delegation. We must make it absolutely clear that the Russians were not expelled from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; they chose to walk out. Having walked out, they have since singularly failed on any potential occasion to present their credentials.

Far from taking any remedial action in respect of Donbass, Crimea, Georgia or Moldova, the Russians have now threatened to withhold their payments to the

Council of Europe to the tune of many millions of euros, which of course causes financial embarrassment. The United Kingdom delegation has made it plain that the Council of Europe is not for sale and its principles are not open to blackmail, but, unfortunately, money has become the driving force that has driven the outgoing secretary-general Thorbjørn Jagland and the current president of the Parliamentary Assembly, Liliane Maury Pasquier, to seek to negotiate with Russia, not over the Donbass region or Crimea or human rights, but over money. We now find ourselves in a position of grave danger. Diplomatically, the Russians expect that there will be an extraordinary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to seek to readmit Russia and to lean upon the rules committee of the Parliamentary Assembly to change the rules to make that possible. That would be an absolute outrage. It would make the future of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and its whole *raison d'être* very precarious indeed.

The Russians have made no move to release the sailors who were arrested on the warships that were boarded, no moves towards improvements in human rights, no movement towards withdrawal from Donbass and no movement towards a resolution of the situation in Crimea. That is entirely unacceptable.

It cannot be right that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, established after the war by Churchill, Jean Monnet and others to seek to bring an end to the twin threats of fascism and communism, should be sold out by its current leadership in this way. The new President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, needs the support of the western world, not appeasement. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will send the message very clearly through the ambassador to the effect that the United Kingdom stands resolute, and will remain resolute, in its support of Ukraine.

10.25 am

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): History is everything and the history of Crimea is a lot more complex than today's debate has so far suggested. Crimea was annexed by Catherine the Great in 1783 and was Russian for the best part of two centuries. After the Russian revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union, Crimea was part of the Russian, not the Ukrainian, Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Changes to boundaries in the USSR were of course arbitrary and were decided solely by Moscow, with no reference to the peoples of the Soviet Union.

In 1946, Crimea was stripped of its status as a so-called autonomous republic and reduced to a mere oblast of Russia, equivalent to a county. In another entirely arbitrary move by Khrushchev, the oblast of Crimea was transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954. Needless to say, not a single Member of the House of Commons or the House of Lords objected to that arbitrary denial of the right of self-determination of the people of Crimea.

During the fall of the USSR, we recognised self-determination as the paramount factor. That is why we supported the independence of Kazakhstan, Belarus and other federative republics. The Crimea oblast also wanted self-determination and in January 1991, Crimean voters voted to be an equal partner in Gorbachev's new

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

union. A few months later, of course, Ukraine voted for independence. We never recognised the Crimean right to self-determination.

As we know, Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. I am sure the referendum was inadequate and we have heard all about that, but no one doubts for a moment that for a considerable part of its history, Crimea has been part of Russia and that the overwhelming part of the population, following heavy immigration over the best part of two centuries, is Russian. The people of Crimea would probably—although we really have no idea—rather like to be independent of both Ukraine and Russia. Ideally, there would be a referendum held under independent international scrutiny and that would be the result, but we do not know.

The situation is extremely complex. Russia is not going to give up Crimea. I do not condone that, and I do not condone the annexation. I have argued against the annexation in the Council of Europe. With my colleagues, I have argued that the Russians should not be allowed in just because of the blackmail to which they are subjecting the Council of Europe. We should stand firm. I think the Council of Europe would benefit from restructuring and becoming a leaner place, and after that, of course, we on the Council of Europe have to decide whether Russia should be readmitted, despite the fact that it will almost certainly never give up Crimea.

That is why the Minister's summing-up speech is all-important. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (*Sir Roger Gale*) said, the Council of Europe has simply stripped Russia of its voting rights; it has refused to present its credentials, but it is still a member of the Committee of Ministers. The Minister must now tell us what the attitude of the United Kingdom Government is. Do the Government believe that Russia should stay in the Council of Europe as a member of the Committee of Ministers? Following the debate we had in the Council of Europe a couple of weeks ago, the decision on whether Russia should be readmitted to the Parliamentary Assembly will almost certainly depend on the Committee of Ministers. Frankly, the Government can no longer be mealy-mouthed about this. They can no longer have good relations with Russia but say that we should bear the brunt in the Council of Europe for its exclusion. We look forward to hearing what the Minister says.

10.30 am

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (*John Howell*) on securing the debate, and on his excellent speech. It was factual, considered and forensic in laying out the current situation in Crimea.

Like other hon. and right hon. Members, I congratulate President-elect Zelensky. As the right hon. Member for Maldon (*Mr Whittingdale*) mentioned, Zelensky is a Jewish national, and Ukraine becomes only the second country in the world with both a Jewish President and Jewish Prime Minister. I look forward to Sputnik news and the Russia Today headline telling us that the fascists and Nazis have just elected a Jew as their leader—no

doubt such nonsense will follow. It somewhat scorches the myth that Russian speakers in Ukraine are being uniquely persecuted by the Government, given that the new President-elect is a Russian speaker and Russian is his first language.

Given that the ambassador of Ukraine joins us here today, I want to mention the appalling events that took place in Holland Park two weeks ago this coming Saturday, when the ambassador's car—thankfully, she was not in it—was deliberately rammed more than once by someone who is currently being held under the Mental Health Acts.

I want to address a few of the issues that have been raised by hon. and right hon. Members, starting with the illegality of the referendum. The Scottish National party does not recognise the referendum that took place in 2014, and we do not recognise the status of Crimea somehow being reunified with Russia either. We know a thing or two about independence movements and referendums in my party. Indeed, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (*Bill Grant*) knows a thing about them as well. What took place in Crimea in 2014 was a sham and should be called out as such by anyone who believes in the democratic rights of people to express how they wish to be governed.

Like other hon. and right hon. Members who have spoken, I have visited Ukraine on a couple of occasions. In common with the right hon. Member for Maldon, I once went out to Avdiivka. As he says, it is right on the frontline with the illegally occupied Donbass region. In that context, we need to get the terminology right. Indeed, the last time I was there, I had this discussion with a journalist. These are Russian-led forces. They are not Russian-backed separatists or forces; they are Russian-led, and they are not all separatists. Some of them wish Donbass to be independent, some wish it to join Russia, and some wish it to be more autonomous within Ukraine. They are Russian-led terrorists and nothing else.

I turn to how we can support Ukraine as individual Members of Parliament, part of which includes not appearing on channels such as Russia Today and Sputnik. Indeed, there are hon. Members who have spoken in this debate—they are no longer in their place, so I will not name them—who do exactly that. They are part of the problem. They include members of my own party, and one quite high-profile former member even has his own television show on Russia Today. For shame that they continue to appear on those channels. For shame that there are Members of this House who not only appear, but take money in return. There are also former Ministers of the current Government who appear on RT. It must stop: otherwise all the poetic speeches mean absolutely nothing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise, as I could not be here earlier, as I wanted; I was at a Northern Ireland Affairs Committee hearing. The hon. Gentleman is referring to Crimea, where human rights have been denied. In eastern Ukraine, Baptist Church ministers have gone missing and cannot be found. Churches have been destroyed and people have been persecuted. Wherever Russia's right-wing influence is, it is clear that Christians are persecuted and human rights are abused. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should take every opportunity to approach the Russian Government,

and Putin in particular, to ensure that Christians are not persecuted beyond any other religion in that part of Ukraine?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I absolutely agree. The hon. Gentleman speaks on these issues regularly and with authority. He is an hon. Gentleman, and I chastise him gently by pleading with him—beseeching him—not to appear on the state broadcaster of the Government who do the terrible things that he has outlined.

I shall conclude, because I see that time is pressing on. The Minister is sound on the issue of Ukraine. Will he tell us what work is being undertaken to free the Azov sailors who are being held illegally by the Russian Federation? In addition to strengthening the sanctions, which he is regularly asked to do, can we lead an international effort to halt Nord Stream 2? It is one of the most dangerous economic and political projects going on in Europe right now. In response to questions that I have asked, the answers that have come from the Minister suggest that the Government do not see it as their issue. It is an issue for all of Europe and everyone who believes in the stability of Europe.

I believe that Crimea will come back to Ukraine one day. Just as the Berlin wall fell, surely Crimea will be reunited with Europe, as it rightly should be. There are Russians who look on with envy at what took place in the Ukrainian elections, and they deserve better than what they have right now. We should extend our friendship to them, because some people want to see a change in Russian society and its political leadership so that it too can be democratic, prosperous and free, and get rid of the miserable tyranny that it suffers under right now.

10.37 am

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this debate. I commend him for the great interest he has taken in this issue for a long time, and for the depth of experience that he showed in his speech. It was very comprehensive and it enlightened people who have not visited Ukraine or been so aware of the relevant issues.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the non-suspension of Russia from the Council of Europe. How we deal with Russia is important, particularly as it is not currently taking part in the Council. As a former member, I understand that. The Council of Europe occupies a pivotal position in this dispute and in relation to Europe as a whole. In that sense, it is a phenomenally important institution, and its great work must continue.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to the “sham referendum” in Crimea and challenged the official statistics. An issue of concern to us all is the illegal occupation of Crimea and the legislative position that Russia has taken, particularly in giving people Russian nationality. The conscription of the Crimean people into the Russian army is also a significant concern.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned, too, the desecration of religious places, which is really important for us to address. Certainly, Orthodox churches, the Jewish community and mosques have been targeted. As he rightly said, the treatment of the Tatar community, a significant group in Crimea, has been a long-standing

issue in the occupation of Crimea. Russia’s treatment of the Tatars, its persecution of the Jewish and Muslim communities and its targeting of Orthodox churches is to be condemned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) spoke about the military activity in Donbass and praised the election. I, too, welcome the election of Volodymyr Zelensky, who has followed a fairly untraditional route. The right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) observed the election, and deemed the process to be reasonably good. When the election was suspended in December, I was slightly concerned that it would not go ahead, but Ukraine has shown itself to be a mature democracy. That peaceful election is a positive step forward for it, and electing somebody who was not previously involved in the political process is a phenomenally good thing. The new President will have to look at serious issues, such as corruption and how to move democracy forward.

I was slightly concerned by the comments of the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who said that the President may seek to exchange peace in Donbass for Crimea. It is not our place to direct the thinking of the President of Ukraine or influence how he sees fit to negotiate. No elected Member of any country would seek to give away any part of their territory. On the contrary, Ukraine continues to fight to be reunified with Crimea.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: If the hon. Gentleman is not seeking to tell people how we should react to situations, he will need to clarify why he said during the Kerch strait aggression that there needs to be de-escalation on both sides, when there was no fault from the Ukrainian side: the only aggressor was the Russian Federation. Will he clarify whether he believes that the Ukrainian Government were an aggressor, or whether it was just the Russian Federation?

Mr Mahmood: I certainly agree that there was no aggression on the part of Ukraine. There has only been aggression by the Russian state in relation to the occupation of Crimea—I say that unconditionally. I was trying to say that it is not our position to guide or interfere in the policies that the President of Ukraine makes in relation to his own country. He was elected in a peaceful, democratic election. I was taking issue with the comments of the hon. Member for The Wrekin. It is important that we look at those issues and resolve them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who, I believe, is on her way to Brussels as we speak, made some pointed comments about interference in elections, particularly in relation to cyber and digital aggression against Ukraine. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has published a fairly significant report into that, and its Chair has done some significant work on the matter. We continue to be concerned about that issue, and my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) continues to take a keen interest in it.

What is happening in the Azov sea is a very serious issue, and we should look at addressing it through sanctions. That is where the Nord Stream 2 pipeline comes into play. We must look not just at Russian participation in the Council of Europe, but at how the Minister can work with Germany, given that a significant

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

trade deal involving gas supplies has been done. There are underlying problems with Nord Stream 2. The initial pipeline that was put in takes money away from Ukraine as a way to punish it, so we must look at how we can support Ukraine. We should use the pipeline as a negotiating tool to try to push this issue forward. That is a serious issue for us to deal with. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) made, I think, a reasonably good joke. He made a comparison with Georgia. We must bear that in mind and ensure we stop any further interventions.

Time is running short, and the Minister wants to get in. I ask him to address the issue of the sailors currently being held by the Russians. We must look at how we can influence that situation. The passage to the Azov sea, the bridge that has been built and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline are serious issues. We must try to get influence so that we gain a reasonable negotiating position with Russia to deal with the issue of Crimea. The Magnitsky amendment, which the right hon. Member for Maldon spoke about, is very important. If the Government can push it along, it would go some way to dealing with the situation.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Ukrainian ambassador, who is in the Public Gallery, for the great work that she continues to do. I hope that the recent attack on her car will not hinder our relationship or her great work.

10.48 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for initiating this debate, and for setting out the arguments so clearly and in such a well-informed manner—as did all hon. Members who contributed.

At the outset, I want to comment on the outcome of Ukraine's presidential election. With the vast majority of votes counted, Volodymyr Zelensky won Sunday's second round run-off with just over 73% of the vote. It is a testament to the development of Ukraine's democracy that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights judged the second round to be peaceful and competitive. Its representative stated that the process respected fundamental freedoms.

I also pay tribute to President Poroshenko, who led Ukraine over the past five years in the face of unprecedented security and foreign policy challenges. He has accepted the choice of the Ukrainian people with great dignity and has offered to work with the President-elect. Our Prime Minister spoke to President-elect Zelensky yesterday. She congratulated him on his clear victory and assured him of the UK's ongoing support. That important commitment is at the heart of today's topic. We will debate one aspect of Ukraine's territorial integrity: Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. The Government's position is absolutely clear: Crimea and Sevastopol are part of Ukraine. Russia's illegal annexation and its continuing destabilisation of Ukraine is reprehensible. This Government will never recognise or legitimise Russia's status in Crimea.

It is now five years since Russia illegally annexed 10,000 square miles of sovereign Ukrainian territory. Russia's military intervention and subsequent unlawful

referendum violated not only the Ukrainian constitution, but international law. As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley clearly outlined, Russia is now using a whole range of strategies to maintain its hold on Ukrainian territory and undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. It uses political manipulation and disinformation to fuel the conflict and interfere with elections; it forcibly moves Ukrainian citizens out of Crimea and moves Russian citizens in, in violation of the Geneva convention; and it persistently fails to meet its commitments under the Minsk agreements. It should withdraw its forces from all of Ukraine.

As we have heard, in November, Russia attacked and seized Ukrainian vessels and 24 servicemen as they sought to enter the sea of Azov through the Kerch strait, as they have every right to do. Those servicemen continue to be detained in Moscow. I call on Russia to release these servicemen immediately and return the vessels to Ukraine.

Russian authorities have overseen the militarisation and the systematic restriction of fundamental rights and freedoms in Crimea, including freedom of expression, of movement and of religion, as well as the right to peaceful assembly. Despite repeated calls in UN General Assembly resolutions, Russia has not permitted the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit to make a full independent assessment of the human rights situation. Even without such an assessment, the weight of evidence is damning. Minority groups, such as Crimean Tatars, face clear and increasing levels of persecution. Twenty-three Tatars were unlawfully detained following raids on their homes on 27 March, for example. Russia continues to ban the Tatars' representative institution, the Mejlis. That violates a 2017 International Court of Justice order.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has also documented a catalogue of abuses against political opponents and minorities in Crimea. Those abuses include arbitrary detentions and arrests, enforced disappearances and torture. Those who refuse to recognise Russian-based legislation applicable to Crimea are denied their basic human rights. Ukrainians face pressure to renounce their citizenship in favour of Russian citizenship; if they refuse, they are denied access to basic services. Crimeans are being forcibly conscripted into the Russian military—nearly 15,000 have been conscripted since 2015.

The UK is instrumental in ensuring a robust international response to Russia's actions. Following the annexation of Crimea, Russia was suspended from the G8. The EU, the US, and partners including Canada and Australia, imposed a robust package of sanctions targeting key sectors of Russia's economy, and we continue to co-ordinate our response to Russia's actions.

Chris Bryant: I bring the Minister back to my earlier point about the Golan Heights. Would it not undermine our position if we opposed annexation in Crimea but endorsed the US position on the annexation of the Golan Heights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that everyone in this Chamber is in favour of the consistent application of such rules across the world, be it with Israel or with Russia. That consistent application is essential if we are to defend what is widely known as the rules-based international order.

Many of those responsible for the annexation have been sanctioned. We have imposed stringent restrictions on doing business in Crimea, for instance. Importing goods from Crimea is illegal and exports to key sectors are banned. We will not legitimise the annexation by making it easy to do business there.

Following the visit to Odesa in December by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, the UK also extended and deepened our military assistance to Ukraine through the Operation Orbital training mission. NATO measures to enhance allies' capability and presence in the Black sea will also contribute to an increased regional deterrent.

Sir Edward Leigh: Is it the Government's view that the Russian Federation should be expelled from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe?

Sir Alan Duncan: When we have something to say, we will choose the time to say it. This is not the forum in which to comment on the Council of Europe, because the debate, as on the Order Paper, is on Crimea.

With respect to the human rights situation, the UK continues to provide funding to Crimean human rights non-governmental organisations and to the UN human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine, to help document and highlight human rights abuses.

It is testament to the bravery and fortitude of Crimean civil society that it continues to speak out in the face of relentless harassment. I know that some hon. Members took the opportunity to meet some remarkable Ukrainian human rights activists in Parliament last month. They were here for the screening of a documentary—partly funded by the UK—that highlights Russia's human rights record in the peninsula, and the plight of over 70 political prisoners. Among such prisoners is Oleg Sentsov, who has been detained since 2014. The Foreign Secretary and I have consistently voiced our serious concerns about his welfare and deteriorating health. We have also condemned Russia for failing to provide Pavlo Hryb and Edem Bekirov with the urgent medical care that they need. They have been detained since August 2017 and December 2018 respectively.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, and its continued interference in Ukraine, are illegal under international law. Ukraine chose a Euro-Atlantic

future, and Russia must respect Ukraine's sovereign decision, its independence and its territorial integrity. Until that happens, there can be no return to normal relations with Russia. That is why we will work to strengthen the resolve of the international community to stand firm against behaviour of this sort by Russia, to keep Crimea in the spotlight, and to expose Russia's human rights violations.

We will continue to work with the Ukrainian Government to support its sovereignty and territorial integrity. We welcome the peaceful conduct of the presidential election on Sunday, and I congratulate Ukraine on holding the elections in an open and transparent manner. I offer my personal congratulations to Volodymyr Zelensky. Not only are the Prime Minister and the President-elect both Jewish, but they are both called Volodymyr. I also express gratitude to President Poroshenko for his leadership over the last five years in the face of the unprecedented security and foreign policy challenges for Ukraine. I welcome the strong partnership that we have built with Ukraine, in which we will continue to invest considerable energy.

In her call with President-elect Zelensky, the Prime Minister reiterated that the UK stands shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine. We will continue to remind the world that Crimea and Sevastopol are Ukrainian, that we will not recognise Russia's illegal annexation, and that Russia will continue to face costs for its flagrant disregard for international law.

10.58 am

John Howell: The debate has been excellent. I thank all who participated, and the Minister for his response. I add my welcome to the Ukrainian ambassador, who has sat through our proceedings and witnessed every moment of the debate. Ukraine can be assured of our support, and that we will do everything we can to ensure that it is safe and has an integral border on which it can rely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Russian annexation of Crimea.

Pension Credit Changes

11 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pension credit changes.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies.

14 January was a pivotal day: not only was there a meaningful vote on Brexit but on that day the Government announced in a written statement that from 15 May 2019 both partners in a couple need to reach state pension age to claim pension credit or pension age housing benefit. That change has been on the statute book since 2012, but the announcement was made quietly through a written ministerial statement on one of the busiest days in Parliament, only four months before it was due to come into effect. Full details of the impact have not yet been published, nor do we have detailed information on how the proposal will operate in a wide range of possible circumstances.

My first question for the Minister is: why was the proposed change made in a written statement and not by a vote of the House? That sets a dangerous precedent—a change put on the statute book two Governments ago, two Parliaments ago, in 2012 is being made now via a written statement instead of another vote in the House.

The Government say that 115,000 mixed-age couples receive pension credit and/or housing benefit. Couples who claim after 14 May could be up to £7,000 worse off compared with a couple claiming now. I will come back to those figures and give some examples. The Department for Work and Pensions estimates that in 2019-20, 15,000 mixed-age couples will be affected by the change. That rises to 30,000 in 2020-21 and 40,000 in 2021-22. In theory, the change applies only to future claimants, but it will also hit any pensioner in a mixed-age couple in receipt of pension credit whose claim is interrupted. As Age Scotland and Age UK point out, couples claiming in the future could be nearly £140 a week worse off than before the change—as I said, an incredible £7,000-per-year cut for some pensioners.

That figure is noteworthy when taken in the context of another one: 40% of people entitled to pension credit do not claim it, whether through lack of knowledge or because of accessibility issues. What are the Government doing to assist such people to take up pension credit, given that alarming figure of 40%?

Age Scotland and Age UK provided me with a figure for an average Glasgow South West constituent in two scenarios, both taking into account state pension, pension credit, housing benefit, council tax reductions, health vouchers and the cold weather payment, and both for a mixed-age couple renting a one-bedroom, council tax band C property, paying rent of £510 a month and receiving state pension of £160 a week.

In the first scenario, the couple would receive total benefits of £395.46 a week, £1,581.84 a month or £19,097.08 a year; the total annual state pension income would be £8,320, so the income lost if no benefits were received and they relied only on some state pension would be £10,777.08. Secondly, the charities investigated how the same couple would fare if they were claiming universal credit, which is already a decisively less generous benefit

and has well documented difficulties in claiming and sustaining payments. Even so, they would face a total annual loss of £6,751.24.

Under the universal credit rules, rather than the existing state pension credit situation, older people face a particularly substantial loss of income—a devastating loss, especially for those on low incomes. It is therefore vital that in the first instance we encourage everyone eligible for pension credit to claim it. It is scandalous to think that people would be financially better off if they lived apart than if they lived together.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is making a powerful speech. A lot of people who reach pension age are struggling to be able to work, although they may not be able to access disability or sickness benefits because of their condition. Does he agree that this change will affect such couples in particular, many of whom include a WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—woman unable to claim the state pension or, as part of a couple, pension credit? Those women will be doubly dissatisfied.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. I will come on to the 1950s-born women and the double whammy affecting them. She makes an excellent point about those on benefits and low income and, as she will be aware because we have just come from the Select Committee on Work and Pensions where we were discussing “No DSS” adverts in the private rented sector, the change could have devastating implications for those people too.

Will the Minister therefore accept the calculations from Age UK and Age Scotland? Will he advise us whether there has been a recent equality impact assessment since January’s announcement? I understand that there was an impact assessment back in 2012, but will he tell us whether there has been an updated equality impact assessment on the pension credit change?

In 2010, a woman aged 60 and her partner aged 65 would both have been entitled to their state pension and both been considered pensioners for pension credit. From 15 May 2019, they will have to wait an extra six years to be in that position. In essence, the change will impose a financial penalty on pensioners who have a younger partner. That is why some WASPI women in Glasgow refer to the change as the “toy boy tax”, as well as the “age gap tax”.

According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, one in six pensioners in the UK already live in poverty. This Government policy will mean that many pensioners might find themselves in the position of being financially better off if they split up with or lived apart from their partner. Pensioners should not be put in a position where it would be better living alone.

As the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) outlined, the policy change will adversely affect women born during the 1950s—precisely the group impacted by other Government decisions to raise the state pension age. Anyone hit by that double whammy will be entitled to feel especially aggrieved, and I can tell the hon. Lady and the Minister that certainly in my constituency the campaigners for the 1950s-born women do feel especially aggrieved by the change and regard it as a double whammy.

The public will be left with little faith in the Government and their ability to deliver pension justice for women born in the 1950s. The Women's Budget Group states that "pension credit is the single most important poverty alleviation mechanism for older people that we have in this country".

The Government should make time for a new debate and a vote on the change, given that the decision was made seven years ago—two Parliaments ago. Rather than just enforcing the change, it is time to have another debate and vote.

According to OECD figures, the UK has the lowest state pension in the developed world; the change will only increase discrepancies. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "UK Poverty 2018" report highlighted the fact that previous falls in pensioner poverty were in part due to the introduction of pension credit. Universal credit will not adequately meet the needs of a household of retirement age because of the strict requirements for seeking work, such as signing on at the jobcentre, qualifying as an unpaid carer or proving inability to work. Changes should be immediately introduced to ensure that older people do not suffer as a result. The policy change will be seen as a stealth tax on ageing couples on low incomes.

The Department for Work and Pensions has confirmed that it expects to save almost £1.1 billion over the next five years due to the changes. Tom McPhail, head of policy at Hargreaves Lansdown, commented that "the impact on individuals and their household spending will amount to hundreds or even thousands of pounds per year and for some it could present real problems".

The meagre savings that the Government will make from the policy change will not match the disastrous consequences that will ensue. If the change is not abandoned, it is anticipated that there will be a consequential increase in demand for support from the Scottish welfare fund, which provides crisis grants to families and people in Scotland on low incomes.

Pensioners could face a heavy financial penalty for having a younger partner. That could affect the health and well-being of those affected and is likely to increase the number of older people living in poverty. Pensioners should not be put in a situation where they could be better off living alone and claiming pension credit than living as part of a couple and receiving universal credit. The change could put pressure on existing relationships. Although the intention is to protect those receiving pensioner benefits before 15 May, they could lose their entitlement if their circumstances change, even if only for one day.

Ruth George: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that thousands of pensioner couples are affected but unaware? I highlighted to the Minister before the recess my concern that the gov.uk calculator incorrectly shows people that they cannot claim pension credit when, in fact, they are entitled to it.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point; the lack of information has been a real issue, particularly for women born in the 1950s, many of whom did not receive letters about the pension changes. I have previously joked that I would be more likely to find a golden ticket in a Wonka bar than find a woman who received a letter about the pension changes.

The universal credit system was designed for people of working age, not pensioners. For example, it includes no additional support for a couple where one member is not expected to work because they are over state pension age.

I thank hon. Members for attending the debate. The pension change is a toy boy tax for many; it is certainly an age gap tax. I look forward to the Minister's response. I hope he will tell me that the changes will be paused so that we can vote in the House on whether they should take place.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing a debate on this important issue.

The Government believe that work is the best route out of poverty. Our reforms of the welfare system are designed to help people into work, make work pay and provide support for those in need. Those are the principles that underpin universal credit—the most significant change to the welfare system for decades—and are the context for the changes we are talking about today.

Single people can claim pension-age benefits only when they have reached state pension age. However, a person under state pension age who has a partner over that age can currently receive benefits intended to support economically inactive pensioner households, without having to meet any work-related conditions. That runs counter to our aim of encouraging people of working age to remain in the labour market and continue saving for their retirement.

As part of the reforms introduced by the coalition Government in 2012, the Welfare Reform Act 2012 set out that a couple will be able to access pensioner levels of means-tested support only when both partners have reached state pension age. In response to one of the hon. Gentleman's first points, we have been clear that the change will not be introduced until the roll-out of new claims to universal credit is complete. That roll-out was completed earlier this year; consequently, on 14 January we announced that we will implement the mixed-age-couples change with effect from 15 May.

I will try to address all the hon. Gentleman's points. Regarding the change being made by a written statement at a particular time, the changes to pension credit that commenced following the order made on 14 January were fully debated on three occasions during the passage of the Welfare Reform Act, and were voted on in Committee. The powers under which the order was made do not require the order to be subject to any further parliamentary scrutiny, since it brings into force primary legislation that Parliament already agreed should be implemented by a commencement order.

Ruth George: When the changes were debated back in 2012 as part of the Welfare Reform Act, universal credit was still a similar level of benefit to tax credits. Since then, following the 2015 budgetary changes, universal credit has been worth significantly less, and increased numbers of people on universal credit are in poverty. Does the Minister not agree that that should be a reason for Parliament to debate again the changes that will affect hundreds of thousands more, often vulnerable, households, in the light of the changed circumstances?

Guy Opperman: With respect, Parliament has debated the matter and made a decision. The hon. Lady will be aware of the 2011 equality impact assessment, the 2012 risk assessment, the universal credit impact assessment, and the ad hoc statistical analysis published on 28 February, which outlined the number of people affected, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned—approximately 115,000 mixed-age couples in the United Kingdom.¹

Chris Stephens: I want to come back to the ministerial statement. There have been various changes to the political make-up of Parliament since 2012. There must be at least 200 new MPs since then, and I think they would want to consider the change, particularly in the light of other benefit changes, as the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) said. Did the Department consider a fresh debate? The Minister mentioned the quality impact assessment. Could he tell us whether a fresh equality impact assessment was made this year prior to the announcement on 14 January?

Guy Opperman: I cannot go back to the specific debates in 2012 and say chapter and verse what was discussed at that stage, but it is a relatively normal procedure for this House to legislate on matters that will be contingent on a written ministerial statement or a commencement order. That standard practice was followed in this case. I am not aware of a fresh equality impact assessment being done. The equality impact assessment was done in respect of the Welfare Reform Act.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): It is interesting to listen to hon. Members. I often find that the SNP tend to weaponise welfare issues to make the charge for independence. My understanding is that powers have been devolved to Scotland under the Scotland Act 2016. Could the Minister confirm what powers are available to the Scottish Government to address this issue? Has he had any constructive discussions with the Scottish Government on the issue that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) raises? I understand that they are pushing back the use of those powers until 2024. Does the Minister agree that rather than giving her sixth statement on indyref2 today, perhaps the First Minister should make a statement about how she will use her powers to address the issue?

Guy Opperman: I will deal with that point and then perhaps return to it in more detail later. I accept that there are other points relevant to this debate, but it is inevitable that devolution will come up when one discusses welfare with a colleague from the Scottish National party and other Scottish colleagues. Certainly, it has come up in relation to the campaigns on the state pension age.

My hon. Friend will be aware of two facts in particular. First, Jeane Freeman, who was my opposite number as the Scottish pensions Minister, wrote to my predecessor on 22 June 2017 concerning the powers under sections 26, 28 and 24 of the Scotland Act. Of particular interest is section 26, about which she wrote:

“This power is limited to providing help with ‘short term needs’, and those needs must require to be met to avoid a risk to a person’s wellbeing. That would not readily allow assistance to the majority of the women affected by the acceleration of the increase in their State Pension Age. Their needs and the risks to their well-being would have to be assessed individually.”

1. [Official Report, 16 May 2019, Vol. 660, c. 4MC.]

She also dealt with the creation of a new benefit under section 28, which is a possibility, and the top-up of reserved benefits under section 24, which is a wide-ranging power to make discretionary payments.

That deals with the original point in 2017. The point can then fairly be made that if the Scottish Government disagree with any of the UK Government’s welfare reforms, they have powers to do something about that in Scotland. I want to make it absolutely clear that, in addition to the substantial support that the UK Government are providing, the Scottish Government have significant new powers available to them to tailor welfare provision for people in Scotland. Although pensions themselves are very definitely a reserved matter, the Scotland Act gives the Scottish Government the ability to use a wide range of new welfare provisions.

I was asked specifically whether I have been engaged with by Scottish Ministers who seek to provide specific top-up support for mixed-age couples. I have not been made aware of any such information being provided to me. Frankly, it is not for the UK Government to do that. If the Scottish Government wish to do that, the ball is in their court, given their powers under the Scotland Act. Clearly, that is a matter for the hon. Member for Glasgow South West to take up with the Scottish Government at Holyrood.

Let me return to the change itself, which ensures that the younger partner has the same work incentives as others of the same age. Those claiming universal credit have access to tailored support from work coaches to help them find work, and universal credit is designed to ensure that work always pays, which is not the case for pension credit.

Let me try to address the specific point raised by the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George). First, I endeavoured to address her emails of 10 and 11 April, which arrived shortly before Easter and were looked at by the Department over Easter. I have written her a letter. We exchanged comments before the debate, and I accept that she has not received that letter. I signed it off late yesterday afternoon, on my first day back in the Department; to be fair to the Department, there is no criticism of it whatever. I also wrote a letter to the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, but we managed to get that to him in time.

I am conscious that the hon. Lady raised a specific fault. I am happy to put it on the record that there was an acceptance that that was a fault, and that, as of 18 April, it has been fixed. The reality of the situation is that the calculator provided the wrong outcome in one particular instance—for couples where one member is in receipt of carer’s allowance and the other retains an underlying entitlement to carer’s allowance. I will leave her to look at the specifics of the letter when she receives it later today. I am grateful to her and the Derbyshire team for bringing the issue to our attention. It has been rectified, and I hope the position on that matter has been addressed.

The hon. Lady raised a separate issue about pension credit generally. It is entirely the case that we are attempting to encourage people to be in a position to take up pension credit in a particular way, and there most definitely is a desire for that to happen. All 115,000 existing mixed-age couples involved were written to subsequent to the decision being made in January. Although I do

not have a regional breakdown of that figure, 8,000 people will potentially be affected in Scotland. I do not have localised figures for the hon. Lady's area.

I want to stress that the change does not in any way affect entitlement to state pension or the level of state pension. Mixed-age couples who are already receiving pension credit or pension-age housing benefit on 14 May will not be affected for as long as they remain entitled to either of those benefits. As I said, we have written directly to those couples to inform them of the change. The change therefore will apply mainly to working-age couples currently claiming means-tested benefit, or to mixed-age couples who apply for benefit only after the date of the change.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for giving way again; he is being very generous. On the calculations, has he had any meetings with Age UK or Age Scotland, which indicate that people could be £7,000 a year worse off as a result of the change?

Guy Opperman: Age UK has met repeatedly—as recently as last month, as I understand it—with civil servants and special advisers in the Department for Work and Pensions. It is almost impossible to state what a future calculation will be without taking into account whether the individual will apply for a job and what their allowances for caring responsibilities and their other entitlements will be. There is a requirement and a desire for universal credit to incentivise and reward paid work, while pension credit is intended to provide long-term support to pensioner households who have left the labour market permanently through retirement.

Ruth George: Will the Minister address the point about carers in households that have had a letter about their pension credit? What will be done for them?

Guy Opperman: I will write to the hon. Lady on that point. I will ensure that she has an answer within seven days. I accept that we did not get a letter to—

Ruth George: It is the people affected I am worried about, rather than the response to me.

Guy Opperman: Well, I will write to the hon. Lady on that point, because I want to address the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, whose debate this is, about pensioner poverty. He criticised the Government in that respect, but I would push back on that.

We are forecast to spend £120 billion on benefits for pensioners in 2019-20, including £99 billion on the state pension. He will be aware that, by reason of the triple lock, from April 2019 the yearly amount of the basic state pension will be around £675 higher than if it had just been uprated by earnings since April 2010, and that the value of the full state pension as a proportion of average earnings is at one of its highest points since the late 1980s.

I could go on about the number of people in employment, which has risen dramatically, the increases in state pension and the successes of automatic enrolment in the employed sphere, but I thank the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to address this matter. If I have missed anything, I will of course write to him.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Ten Years of the Work Capability Assessment

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered 10 years of the work capability assessment in relation to employment and support allowance and universal credit.

This feels like such an inadequate environment to describe the work capability assessment and its brutal consequences. I wish that every single person affected by the system could be here with us in the Chamber and look in the eyes of those who defend the system. I hope that when they have heard what I am about to describe, Conservative Members—there are not many of them—will feel shame, and that in this debate we can do justice to the experiences of those subject to the work capability assessment.

The work capability assessment for the employment and support allowance and universal credit should be a simple concept: people who have a physical or mental health problem or a disability that means that they cannot work or have a limited ability to work will receive a replacement income from the state. I will talk about the face-to-face application process and the assessment, which are draconian, elicit fear, deny justice and have, in some circumstances, ended up contributing to the end of life. As Frances Ryan wrote recently in *The Guardian*, suicide is becoming a feature of the system.

Everyone in the Chamber will know someone who is unable to work for whatever reason. Those with personal wealth are often able to avoid having to prove that they are worthy of income replacement. Because they have that personal wealth, they are safe from having to share every single detail of a condition or illness, and do not have to wonder if they will be believed. People without savings, on the other hand, are only one step away—one accident or one conversation with the doctor—from being subject to that system.

Let me set out some of the elements that we believe are wrong with the system; this is based on evidence gathered from my constituents when they come to surgeries, on submissions by professionals, and on the vast number of submissions I have received from people currently applying for this social security payment. In both the application form and the face-to-face assessment, the descriptors that enable a score to be given to assess a person's ability to carry out tasks are essentially a functionality test. They cannot capture the fluctuating nature of physical and mental unwellness or disability and how that could prevent or limit the ability to work. People often describe feeling punished for telling the truth. Yes, perhaps they could go out unescorted on a journey somewhere, but the test is not interested in, for example, the panic attack before leaving the house, or the emotional recovery afterwards. Perhaps venturing to the supermarket will have been their only trip out that month, but making that journey could lose them their entitlement.

In reality, one day someone may be in the depths of despair, and the pain from their condition may be unbearable; the next day, they may be able to have a laugh over a cup of tea with a loved one. The question is, should they lie about that laughter or feel shame about it because they might get points deducted? Does that laughter render meaningless the pain felt the day before? Fundamentally, does that have any bearing on someone's ability to work? I think not. The test ignores the complex reality of living with long-term or fluctuating conditions.

Many people have told us that they do not feel accurately represented by the reports written about them. Advisers have openly claimed that they see copy-and-paste jobs. A constituent read that they were apparently happy and confident during the assessment, when in fact they were crying and shaking. No wonder as many as 74% of ESA decisions are overturned at appeal, according to Citizens Advice. That, of course, is one of the consequences of using a private company to assess the medical conditions of people who need support. Not having people qualified in the condition or illness with which assessors are presented is also a huge issue.

It is claimed that Maximus incentivises health professionals through the number of reports they complete. Logic says that that could directly lead to a proliferation of inaccuracies. Ultimately, profit should not be made from ill health; it leads to corner cutting and misplaced priorities. To defend the marketisation of the process is obscene.

I am not sure whether the Government or Conservative Members realise just how truly terrified some people are of the brown envelope from the Department for Work and Pensions. They know that they will be forced through a long and extremely difficult process. They will have to attend an assessment, and the decision notice they receive about the outcome of their work capability assessments is often inaccurate and misleading, leading to a long and stressful appeal process of up to 18 months; that is 18 months without the entitlement that those people deserve and need.

The process exacerbates poor health, and the Government make things worse. When people, because of their physical or mental health condition, ask that their assessment be carried out at their home, the answer given is almost always no. My caseworkers and agencies have sent substantial evidence to private contractors to show that my constituents would have severe difficulty attending the assessment centre. The stock response is, "If the claimant can get to their GP or to the hospital, they can attend the assessment centre." How cold-hearted is that?

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend not agree that there is a difference between someone going to a location quite close to their home, which they are familiar with, and an assessment centre that may be many miles away and difficult to get to unless they have their own transport?

Laura Pidcock: That is right, and in a place like North West Durham, where we have an inadequate and expensive transport system, it is unjustifiable not to have assessments carried out at home if someone is feeling unwell and faces stress in having to go to that assessment.

If the person does manage to get to the assessment centre, the assessor uses that as evidence of their ability to travel, walk, sit comfortably and cope with social interactions. One person got in touch with me to say that they had to sit in the assessment centre waiting room in soaking wet clothes due to their incontinence issues. Is this a system anyone can really defend? Is anyone really comfortable with a private provider forcing people to attend assessments in pain and with worry, to be degraded by the DWP?

If a person is found fit for work when they are not, that can have a huge impact on their mental and financial wellbeing. It can have a direct impact on their entitlement to housing benefit and council tax benefit, plunging them into destitution, and resulting in increasing debt, risk of eviction and untold stress. People wrongly found fit for work are then expected to do job searches and training, and are even sanctioned. It came as no surprise to any of us Opposition Members that in 2016 the UN concluded that the Government had committed “grave and systematic violations” of the rights of people with disabilities. That report should have seen an end to the Government, but they limp on.

For people who do go on to win at appeal, reassessment is too frequent. No sooner have they won than they are being reassessed—even people with terminal illnesses have to endure that. Imagine the retriggering of mental health difficulties when people have to describe, in assessment after assessment, historical sexual abuse to which they were subject.

Let me mention some of the contributions from people who got in touch. One person said:

“The process feels like psychological rape, expressly designed to make you feel that you are the absolute property of the state, that you are not a human being and that your continued survival is basically an affront to society.”

Another said:

“When you are disabled, you are defined by the able-bodied by what you cannot do, rather than what you can do. No disabled person wants to be a burden on society. They want to be an active contributor but are denied this by society”,

and that

“The whole thing should be abolished as it’s a cruel and pointless exercise in ideology.”

It is about ideology, isn’t it? This system, with its complexities, its high thresholds and the way in which employment and support allowance and higher rates of universal credit have been denied to so many, cannot be seen outside the context of almost 10 years of austerity and budget cuts, which have literally taken money from people who are disabled, unwell or dying.

What are the worst consequences, the ultimate results, of this brutality? Jodey Whiting, who lived in Thornaby, not too far from my constituency, took her life 15 days after her benefits were stopped for missing a work capability assessment when seriously ill. The independent case examiner found multiple failings on the part of the DWP, including it simply not following its safeguarding procedures. Her mum, Joy Dove, is campaigning for an independent inquiry into benefit death and I am sure everyone on this side would say “All power to her” in that campaign.

Stephen Smith, aged 64, who had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, osteoarthritis and an enlarged prostate that left him in chronic pain, failed a work capability assessment in 2017, which meant that his employment

and support allowance payments were stopped. Anybody who saw Stephen’s emaciated body on social media will have been horrified. Stephen died last Monday. Jeff Hayward, who won his appeal seven months after his death, had a debilitating skin condition and spent his last 18 months fighting a “fit for work” decision. Michael O’Sullivan, aged 60, from north London had long-term mental health problems, and the coroner found that the benefit process was a key trigger for his death.

These are the real-life tragedies of a broken system. I do not think I can bear to hear the Minister say, yet again and as his predecessor did, that we should come to him with our individual problems with the system. They are not individual problems; they are systemic failings, and a consequence of privatising social security and making £37 billion in welfare cuts.

Let us be honest: this is institutionalised bullying and harassment of sick and disabled people. I have no doubt that administrative ineptitude is part of it, but when the issue is on this scale, there can be no other conclusion. By deliberately stripping people of their rights, in order to disrupt the welfare state and the very concept of legal entitlement, the Government have trodden all over the expectation of citizens that they will be looked after in their hour of need. And what for? To replace the state with private and family provision, to boost the coffers of private insurers, and to replace legal rights with charity, subject to moral judgments of deservingsness.

It does not have to be like this. How can our social security system be about security and not about punishment? The Labour party has rightly committed to scrap the work capability assessment. That will be a big step forward and will no doubt be welcomed by disability rights groups and welfare rights agencies alike. In the meantime, why do the Government not start rectifying injustices in the system by taking the vast amount of evidence from medical professionals, including GPs, consultants and nurses, into account? Testimony should be fundamentally believed. The culture permeating the DWP is one of disbelief that looks cynically on those who request help. Stressful, face-to-face assessments should be used only if there is an absolute necessity, such as a lack of evidence on which to decide on entitlement. Assessments should be a last resort.

The system should be designed by people who are experts through experience. Experts who understand how conditions affect the ability to work should be employed. Any social security system that replaces the work capability assessment as it exists today should not be a functionality test with arbitrary rules that do not account for the fluctuating nature of a person’s condition, disability or illness. There needs to be a revision of the assessment criteria, so that they are linked much more closely to the real world of work, or the work that the person was doing. Knowing whether someone can move a carton of milk with one hand cannot allow us to understand a person’s comfort or ability to work in a specific environment. Any process should include an assessment of the additional support that person would need to ease them back into the workplace. Recording of assessments should be standard, unless a person asks not to be recorded. The Government are dragging their heels on that recommendation.

Private outsourcing of the assessments has to be scrapped. The market has failed all aspects of the social security system, placing company profit before the needs

[*Laura Pidcock*]

of the people interacting with the system. When will the Government understand that private enterprise and illness are incompatible, and inevitably lead to the injustices that we see today?

When people are dealing with the stresses of not being in full health and of needing support for their disability or mental health condition, they should fundamentally not be subject to further stress, degradation and even abuse by the state. The system should be designed on the presumption that people are telling the truth when they come to see the assessors. They should not be forced through a humiliating and exhausting process that often results in them winning appeals at tribunal, with the help of the excellent but underfunded advice agencies and many of our caseworkers. For many people, their last fight on this earth is not with their illness, but with the state, and that fact alone should lead us to scrap this dreadful system.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) for her moving and impressive speech. We will have an informal limit of seven minutes from now on. If right hon. and hon. colleagues could adhere to that, I would be grateful.

2.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on presenting the case so well, with the passion and belief that we all know she has for the subject.

To say that the difficulty with ESA and the transition to universal credit is evident in my constituency is a gross understatement. I have talked to the Minister about this on a number of occasions. His door has always been open and he has told me to bring any issues I have to him. I have done that, and found him responsive and helpful. I hope that at the end of the debate, when we have all made our contributions, the Minister will be able to address some of the issues that I and others have, and put our minds at ease.

The difficulties that people face are astronomical. My comments will not be a surprise to anyone here; I am known as a man with a very soft heart. When I look at a person who is clearly ill and vulnerable, who has tears in their eyes because they simply do not understand what is happening and feel that they are alone and helpless, it is hard not to be upset and angry for them at a system that puts so much stress and pressure on the most vulnerable in our society. I am all for getting people up and out to work, giving training and helping to build and boost confidence to start a job. I do not want to see one able person out of work in Strangford, but in seeking to weed out the few who could work but will not, we are mentally exhausting and physically injuring those who are not capable of working.

I want to give an example that exemplifies all my comments. My staff recently dealt with the case of a young man who was living in his car. It became clear to me that this young man was broken; there is no other way to describe it. I called my parliamentary aide into the meeting. She is a sympathetic person and she had

her arm around him, telling him that he was important, that he mattered and that we would help him get a fresh start. This was definitely a man on the edge, whose only companion was his dog. I do not know how he got to that position or what mistakes he had made, but I do not need to know that; I just needed him to know that we would help him.

We spoke to the phenomenally helpful Elizabeth, who is the manageress at our local jobcentre, who worked her way through the issues with his benefits and helped him. He could not face people, so he was outside the system. We had to take him and do everything for him. We spoke to the housing executive who managed to sort out hostel accommodation for him in the short term and now he has his own flat; that all happened at the meeting we had.

We spoke to the local food bank, based at Thriving Life Church in Newtownards, who provided him with food and sanitary products. We spoke to all these people. He was so low and so down that he could not have spoken to them because he had not got the ability to socially interact with people. We spoke because he could not speak for himself. The staff in my office were able to help him and get him out of the dark hole that he was in.

When I think of this young man—a man who could not even look us in the eye that day, who I knew was on the precipice, at the point of no return, and was expected to work in that state, with no mercy shown—I am reminded of the role that we have in this House. As MPs, we are blessed and privileged to represent those people and to try to help them in the times when they need help.

There are too many people living in their cars who cannot get a break and do not know where to turn. Too many people have been pushed to the edge of darkness and feel alone, and that tells me that we need more Elizabeths and Lees in our jobcentres. We need more Owens and Irenes in our housing executives. We need more Natalies and Susannes in our food banks. Those people could not wave a magic wand to make it all okay, but they played their part to see this young man, over a few weeks, into a position where he could look me in the eye and thank me. What a turnaround that was!

Unfortunately, that was only one example. In that three-week period, there were a number of people who were under the radar, who had slipped out of touch with the benefits office and were not in touch with the Executive or with others. We need to task all civil service staff with the fact that compassion is as much a qualification as an English GCSE.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions compassion, but is it not also correct that there must be professionalism? Linda Hending in my constituency set up a support group for people with myalgic encephalomyelitis. She found that, while 10 of those 11 people had either been found fit for work or had insufficient points for the Personal independent payment, all those decisions had been overturned on appeal. While it is inevitable that there will need to be some assessment, is it not critically important that those decisions are got right the first time, so that people do not have to go through the strain of an appeal, even if it is successful in the long term?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I have a number of girls in my office, and one in particular who does nothing but benefits. She works full time on ESAs, PIPs and DLAs as the turnover goes for income support and all those other things. She works full time on benefits, and the other staff fit in work with that as well. We win a number of appeals because of the advice that is given. To be fair to the Minister, I have suggested to him that we need staff who are professional and able to advise in the way they should.

Yes, there are those who take advantage—I know that that happens sometimes—but I want to talk about those who need the help. Ten years into this, I still do not think we have the balance right, and that is part of many people's mental health struggles. In the short time that I have, I want to mention that we need compassion for those with cancer who are claiming universal credit. Alongside the physical and emotional impacts, cancer brings with it a real risk of financial hardship. Macmillan Cancer Support has found that four out of five people with cancer are, on average, £570 a month worse off because of their diagnosis. Last year, Macmillan's support line advisers received 26,500 calls from people seeking advice on applying for universal credit.

The first problem is access: people who are hospitalised often do not have access to the internet, and navigating a long and complex online application form is a horrendous thing to go through at a time when their body will not let them attend to it. Those who are undergoing treatment or have a terminal diagnosis have also had to attend the jobcentre, which can be distressing, and in some cases go against medical advice.

The initial five-week waiting time for universal credit is causing problems for people with cancer, many of whom have had to give up their work completely due to their condition and treatment. That even applies to people with a terminal illness, meaning that people who may have less than six months to live now spend more than one month of those six waiting for their benefits. Under the old system, people with a terminal illness could expect to get paid as soon as their claim was processed. The Minister knows, because I have spoken to him about it, but I believe we need to address these delays. Some 67% of people are not receiving their full payment on time.

This year, the Government will pilot the managed migration of people to universal credit. It is welcome that this process will be piloted before Parliament is asked to make a final decision; I welcome that and it is good that we have that process, but it will not solve the problems for people already receiving universal credit. We need to do this better, for everyone's sake. I look to the Minister at this point: we need a sea-change of attitude, with compassion at its heart, working its way from this place to every level of public service. Young men such as Michael and others will simply not survive without it.

2.53 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I reiterate the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on an excellent speech, outlining some of the range of problems that we have with this work capability assessment process.

This feels like déjà vu: we are here, yet again, to argue that the current system of work capability assessment is not fit for purpose. We can use the latest available data that tells us that nearly three out of every four claimants who appeal their assessment decision telling them that they are fit for work will have the decision overturned. We can reference the five reviews of work capability assessment over the past 10 years, which have repeatedly raised problems with the assessment process, ranging from medical reports being mislaid to blatant lies in assessment reports. We can look at the Work and Pensions Committee's report from last year on ESA and PIP assessments, which saw an unprecedented 3,500 individuals share their experience and what they had been through, as my hon. Friend described.

We can discuss the death rates for people on ESA and, before that, on incapacity benefit. In 2013 that death rate was 4.3 times that of the general population, increasing from 3.6 times in 2003. That shows the level of sickness and ill health of people in this group. As has already been said, this is a poorly group of people who deserve to be listened to and respected. We can talk about the peer-reviewed research that estimated that between 2010 and 2013, work capability assessment was independently associated with an additional 590 suicides, 280,000 cases of self-reported ill health and 725,000 additional antidepressant scripts.

However, anyone watching this debate will be thinking, "What on earth is the point?", because to date the Government have taken not a jot of notice. Little has changed. We know how this is affecting people, as we have already heard: people living in fear and dread of the envelope dropping on their doormat, inviting them for their work capability assessment.

The Government have said they want to amalgamate the work capability assessment and PIP assessments by 2021. They say they want a more personalised approach and will involve disabled people in this process. I ask the Minister which disabled people's organisations have been involved in the decisions. I appreciate that charities may have been involved, and it is important that they be involved, but what DPOs and disabled people have been involved? Were they involved in the decision to put the contracts for this new assessment process out to tender? That has already happened; we had one week, and then the contract for this new process went out to tender.

What are the Government going to do in the meantime, while this Government-orchestrated harm—it is a Government policy—continues? I am really concerned, and I hope the Minister can respond, because to date there has been little but warm words and platitudes.

As we have heard, on Monday we learned that Stephen Smith, the Liverpool man whose emaciated body was reminiscent of someone found in a concentration camp, not in 21st-century Britain, had died as a result of multiple organ failure after being found fit for work. We know he is not the first. My hon. Friend mentioned Jeff Hayward, who died in 2018 of a heart attack, seven months before a tribunal overturned a decision that he was fit for work.

Also in 2018, Jimmy Ballentine committed suicide after being found fit for work, as did Amy Nice, Kevin Dooley and Brian Bailey. Jodey Whiting, my hon. Friend's constituent, Elaine Morrall, Daniella Obeng and Brian Sycamore all committed suicide in 2017 as a result of being found fit for work. In July 2017, Mark Scholfield,

[Debbie Abrahams]

a terminal cancer patient, received no universal credit before he died, in spite of his illness. Chris Gold, in 2017, was found fit for work following a stroke. He was facing foreclosure when he died as he could not work. Lawrence Bond died in 2017, collapsing and dying on the street after being found fit for work.

Julia Kelly committed suicide in 2015, as did Ben McDonald. Chris Smith, who had terminal cancer, was found fit for work right up until his death. David Clapson died in 2014, as did Michael Connolly. “George, from Chesterfield” died that year as the result of a heart attack, again after being found fit for work. Robert Barlow, another terminal claimant, died after losing his ESA. David Barr, Trevor Drakard, Shaun Pilkington and Terry McGarvey also died in 2014. Lee Robinson, Robert Christian, Jacqueline Harris, Nicholas Peter Barker and David Groves died in 2013.

That is not an exhaustive list, but those names are an indictment of this Government and their policy, and so is the lack of change that has happened as a result of those deaths. There needs to be an independent inquiry, as Jodey Whiting’s mother says, into the deaths of claimants found fit for work. Until then, there should be a moratorium on all reassessments; for new assessments, as has been said, medical evidence should be the primary data used, not the blatantly flawed assessment processes.

Sir Henry, I am sure you agree that any Government’s first duty is to protect their citizens, but our disabled citizens have been spectacularly failed by this Government. Like millions of people across the country, I condemn the attacks in Sri Lanka, and I share concerns about the emergency that is climate change, but the deaths of disabled people as a result of Government policy are nothing less than a scandal. I challenge each and every one of us, in this room and outside, to rise and say to the Government, “Enough is enough!”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. I thank the hon. Lady very much for her moving speech. We will have to put a six-minute voluntary limit on subsequent speeches.

3 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) for securing the debate. I pay tribute to my parliamentary casework team, and to Citizens Advice and Money Matters, local organisations that work with the casework team to ensure that people who are going through the ESA and PIP system or who have other issues get their social security. The assistance that they provide to my constituents is invaluable. Without those organisations, it is quite clear that more people would suffer.

I will confine my observations to a Work and Pensions Committee report. As a member of that Committee, I can say that, such was the level of interest in PIP and ESA assessments, 200 organisations submitted evidence and there were 3,500 individual submissions. That tells

us more than anything else the level of interest, and the pain and suffering that people are going through as a result of these assessments.

Let us look at the Department’s own statistics. There have been 3.1 million ESA applications, with 1.7 million assessments completed, but with payments and awards issued to only 1 million people. That suggests low confidence and trust in the assessment system. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) quite rightly said that it is important that the Department and the assessment process are correct first time. However, that is not the experience of far too many people, which is why I am delighted to take part in this debate secured by the hon. Member for North West Durham.

The simple fact is that claimants can have multiple health conditions, which can mean that they have severe limitations. There was a recommendation to commission and publish independent research on the impact of the application and assessment processes of both ESA and PIP on claimants’ health. Will the Minister tell us whether the Department accepted that recommendation and will take it forward?

Claims are often made by telephone, Sir Henry, and you and others will be aware that one campaign I launched since I got here was to abolish the telephone tax. I am delighted to say that the Government finally listened, and that the telephone tax was abolished. It is ludicrous to suggest that it should cost claimants phoning a telephone helpline 55p a minute, and I am delighted that that has now gone. However, as a result of health conditions, there are claimants who require communications in specific formats—I think particularly of those with hearing impairments—and we need to make sure that there are other methods for them to apply for ESA or PIP and the like. I hope that the Minister will update us on that.

The hon. Member for North West Durham was absolutely right on home visits. Maximus told the Select Committee that decisions on any request for home visits that they would carry out would be based on medical fact, not medical opinion. I hope that the Minister will say a bit about the guidelines on home visits that the Department gives to assessors. That brings us to the assessors and their knowledge; they can have partial knowledge or no knowledge at all of specific conditions. I still remember asking Maximus and Atos who a claimant with multiple sclerosis and a history of depression would see if they were to visit an assessment centre. The answer came back that they would see a general occupational therapist. If the assessment process is to have that conditionality, which I personally oppose, claimants must see people at the assessment centre with some knowledge or expertise on specific conditions.

We really need to improve understanding among healthcare and social care professionals and claimants about what constitutes good evidence, including measures, monitoring and reporting, and the supply of evidence. For far too many people, the assessment process has become a lottery. I agree with the recording of assessments, because we really need to end the mistrust around assessments. The fact is that appeals are upheld based on oral evidence given at the original assessment, not at the appeal. That is why recording is a must, and I hope the Minister will tell us that there has been progress on that.

A full copy of the report should be given, to increase transparency, and the quality of reports really must improve. We have contractors who have not once hit their targets for acceptable reports. If they cannot hit that target, we have to ask why they were given the contracts in the very first place. If a contractor failed to hit targets in any other part of the public sector, they would have that contract taken off them. I hope that the Minister can tell us what feedback and quality control measures the Department has put in place, because far too many people are suffering under this system. We have to ensure that it improves. I am delighted that the Scottish Government will do away with private contractors to undertake assessments. The Westminster parties should consider that too.

3.7 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing the debate and on the excellent way in which she introduced it, covering a range of issues. I felt compelled to speak because many of my experiences with constituents are similar to those we have heard. I have received the clear message—I hope the Minister receives it as well—that improvements to the assessments process are very much needed.

Some constituents who have attended assessments have raised concerns with me about the fact that assessors carry out the assessments very quickly and do not listen to their answers. We have touched on the refusal to conduct home assessments, sometimes despite medical evidence that they are necessary. On one occasion, a constituent suffering from agoraphobia was refused a home assessment. Surely the need for one in that situation was obvious.

I note from an overview of the work capability assessment mandatory reconsideration and appeals process that, from October 2013 to June 2018, 33% of assessments were closed by the claimant. That is 1.3 million people—not a trifling number. The Government line may be that all those people pulled out of the process because they were fit to work, but I doubt it is as simple as that. My worry is that there are people within that 1.3 million who would be entitled to ESA but did not go through with the process because they were too anxious or worried about the assessment or because they simply could not cope with the idea of having to discuss their intimate medical issues with a stranger. I would like to know from the Minister whether any research has been done into those 1.3 million people, the reasons why they withdrew and whether people in genuine need have been failed.

The study goes on to say that 15% of all applicants go on to register a mandatory reconsideration, which is 370,000 people within that five-year period. Some 85% of those reconsiderations stick with the original decision, and 21% of those people then go on to submit a formal appeal. There is sometimes a misconception that the mandatory consideration is the appeal stage, and that there are no further opportunities to challenge. However, those who carry on to launch an appeal have a success rate, according to these figures, of 63%, although we heard from my hon. Friend that, according to the CAB, it is more like 74% or 75%.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): My office team has experience of constituents challenging assessments and getting nowhere until they come to our office and we get a reconsideration straightaway, which gives the impression that they are not taken seriously. It is the exact same evidence, but they are not listened to until we get involved. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a sad state of affairs?

Justin Madders: I find that disappointing, but not surprising. The fact that the appeals success rate is so high suggests that not only the initial assessment is flawed, but the mandatory reconsideration stage is not a proper appraisal of the full merits. Perhaps that takes place only when Members of Parliament get involved. A cynical view would be that the mandatory reconsideration stage is just a hurdle put in front of people to make life a little more difficult for them. I am shocked that recent figures for the appeal stage show that the DWP does not even bother to turn up to about 80% of the appeal hearings.

I want to pay tribute to my fantastic local CAB, which represents people at the appeal hearings. However, it cannot help everyone, and it is the people who are not able to get representation I worry about.

Given my constituents' experiences, there is no doubt that the original assessments are flawed. Many decisions are overturned at tribunal, and it seems the system does not learn from its mistakes. For example, one constituent was assessed five times in eight years of being on ESA. At each assessment she was found fit for work. On each occasion she appealed and on each occasion she won that appeal. In the process she paid £150 to get medical evidence to support her appeals. How can the assessment process get it wrong five times? How can the absolute waste of public money that five separate appeals must have cost be justified when the final decision was the same every time? What does it say about the Government's approach to people with long-term conditions? How many times does someone have to prove that they are ill and unable to work?

Last-minute cancellations have also been an issue. I have heard from constituents whose assessments have been cancelled on the day the assessment is due to take place, and in some cases the constituents were actually at the assessment centre when their appointment was cancelled. That seems to be particularly the case when the assessment is scheduled for a time after half past three. The most recent example involved a lady who was struggling when entering the assessment centre. Obviously, it is a very stressful experience. She was shaking, crying and not engaging, and then she was told that her assessment would be delayed by another 45 minutes, at which point she became so distressed that she had to leave the centre and cancel the appointment. That is a callous and uncaring way to treat someone. When one of my constituents rang up two days before her assessment to give notice that she would not be well enough to attend, she was told that it was too late for the assessment to be rescheduled and she would be recorded as a no show. It is double standards of the highest order.

In conclusion, people with long-term conditions deserve compassion, respect and support. They should not be made to feel they are on trial because they are ill.

3.13 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this debate and on the tone that she set at the beginning.

I was first elected in 2015 and I have spoken out repeatedly about the damage that the assessments and the way in which they are carried out do to my constituents and constituents across the United Kingdom. Although I am glad to speak in this debate, I am really annoyed that it is necessary, because it should not be. The Minister is not hearing anything today of which he is not aware. He knows exactly what is going on and it is not acceptable that we come back time after time to say the same things over and over. I know the Minister will tell us about changes that have been made and about people who are not reassessed if they have got a severe disability or a lifelong illness. He will tell us that people with progressive conditions requiring a high level of support will be assessed only every 10 years. I say to him that that is all very well and good, but it simply is not good enough.

The Disability Benefits Consortium, made up of 80 different charities and organisations, has stated that it did not think assessors had sufficient expertise to carry out assessments. Respondents who had seen a copy of their paperwork following assessment said that it “badly” or “very badly” reflected the answers that they gave. We all know that to be true when we speak to our constituents. Citizens Advice has told us that 81% of its advisers report inaccuracies in work capability assessments, so the information is out there. It is in our constituencies and in our surgeries, and I know it will be in the Minister’s inbox as well.

Constituents in a state of extreme distress have told me that they felt the questions they were being asked at the assessments were extremely intimate, invasive and inappropriate. Discussing very intimate details of your medical challenges with a panel of strangers in a context that causes the claimant distress and nervousness very often sets back the claimant’s health, exacerbating their condition, and all of that is before they are told, often incorrectly, that they are fit for work, with the paperwork not accurately reflecting the answers that the claimant gave at the assessment.

Some 51% of ESA claimants are recorded as having a mental or behavioural disorder as their main disabling condition. Rethink Mental Illness has published a report that states:

“Assessments can be traumatising and anxiety-inducing”

in a system that requires claimants to

“collect their own medical evidence”,

and it

“inherently discriminates against people with mental illnesses”.

Often a false sense of security is created where assessors appear friendly and ask questions supposedly by way of a preamble to the formal interview: “Do you have pets?” “Do you have a dog?” “Do you walk it?” “What lovely weather we’re having.” “Do you like to sit in the garden?” All the questions are asked as if it is casual conversation, only for the claimant to subsequently discover, upon receiving his or her paperwork, that their

assessment decision has been reached on the basis of answers to the so-called casual questions instead of on the medical evidence presented. I think that is sinister.

Danielle Rowley: The hon. Lady is making an important point. I have a constituent who was asked if they could get a pen out of their bag, and they did, and then that was put down in the assessment. She was in floods of tears at my surgery because she felt she had been tricked. It is just awful.

Patricia Gibson: A false sense is presented to the people, some very vulnerable, when they go to the assessments, and it is simply not good enough. The simple fact is that the system—the Minister knows this—which is a partnership with the private sector that has been in place since 2008, brought in under Labour, opened the gates, but the Minister has to understand that it has opened the gates to a place where folk who are sick and disabled are commodified, and it is not working.

Nearly half of women involved in work capability benefit tests have attempted suicide. We have seen the reports of claimants being asked, “Why haven’t you killed yourself?”, and even a double amputee being told he was no longer eligible for the mobility aspect of his disability living allowance. Sadly, such stories continue to emerge, and we have heard today about the very sad case of Stephen Smith, with which I am sure the Minister is familiar.

I have heard DWP Ministers say—I cannot remember whether this includes the Minister here today—the number of successful appeals against decisions shows that the system is working. I must confess I have never heard such stuff and nonsense. The number of successful appeals shows that too many incorrect decisions are made, which deny the most vulnerable in society, the sick and infirm, the support that they need and deserve. That is why the Scottish Government are committed to taking a lead on obtaining medical evidence so that claimants are not burdened with it. That is why there will be no private sector involvement in assessments, so that there will be no profit motive for it to declare claimants fit for work when it is not in a payment-by-results system. That is why the Scottish Government say that claimants will be offered a location and time and date that suits them for assessment, with home visits for those with travel difficulties, and that is why they have said audio recordings of assessments will be standard to ensure accuracy and transparency.

I urge the Minister and the Government to step up and admit that the current system punishes those who are unfit to work and those who are sick, and cruelly strips them of their dignity. I hope that the Minister will admit that it does not work. I urge him to look at the measures that the Scottish Government will implement and take a leaf out of that particular book. The current system does not work for my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran. It does not work for anyone’s constituents. I ask the Minister to do the right thing: reach out a compassionate hand to those living with a disability. Anyone who is a Minister for Disabled People should do no less.

3.19 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this

important debate. The work capability assessment was introduced for employment and support allowance claimants in 2008. It has also been used to reassess incapacity benefit claimants and determine eligibility for additional universal credit support. It is now more than a decade since the introduction of the assessment: a good time to reflect on the impact that it has had on the lives of claimants across the country.

From 2008 to 2017, 48% of all work capability assessment outcomes were successfully appealed in Scotland and nearly half of all fit-for-work outcomes reached through work capability assessments were also overturned. In my constituency, 47% of appeals were successful in overturning the outcomes of such assessments and almost half of all fit-for-work outcomes reached through them were successfully appealed. The most recent national figures released by the DWP highlight the fact that 65% of fit-for-work outcomes were overturned in the period from December 2017 to January 2019.

Those figures illustrate the negative impact of work capability assessments on claimants, and the fact that they are failing, because they find people fit to work when they are clearly incapable of working. Claimants in that situation have to go through the appeals process with no access to their ESA payments, which means that they face poverty or destitution, or making a claim for jobseeker's allowance or universal credit while waiting for their appeal to be processed. Considering the problems that there have been with universal credit, such as the five-week wait for the first payment, that is unacceptable. Many people face financial hardship and further uncertainty simply because they have challenged a work capability assessment outcome. Another thing to reflect on is the fact that ESA appeals are currently subject to a clearance time of 30 weeks.

Work capability assessments have also led to a situation where vulnerable claimants are denied the support that they need. The latest DWP figures show that 68% of those suffering from injury were found fit for work; 59% of those living with connective tissue diseases and 40% of those with mental or behaviour disorders were also found fit for work. How can the Government claim to be building a fairer society when work capability assessments are pushing the most vulnerable people into work in spite of their disabilities and medical conditions? It is clear that the assessments are not fit for purpose.

That view is shared by disability charities and the Work and Pensions Committee, whose 2017 inquiry received more than 3,000 letters from individuals who shared their experiences of the assessment process. More than 100 people reported that they or someone they cared for had experienced suicidal feelings as a result of the assessment process. We have heard today that people have taken their own lives. Shame!

Others highlighted a mismatch between what they had told assessors about their conditions and the content included in the assessor's written report. In response, the Work and Pensions Committee made recommendations designed to improve the assessment process, including recording face-to-face assessments and providing clearer guidance to claimants about submitting evidence to support their claims. Similar recommendations have also been made by organisations such as Citizens Advice. The Government's response was to ignore the recommendations.

The Secretary of State might be striking the right tone, but actions speak louder than words, and the problem with work capability assessments cannot be hidden through merging them with PIP assessments. Disability Rights UK summed up the shortcomings of the Government's approach:

"You can't merge two badly constructed processes and expect to come up with one fit-for-purpose approach".

How right that is. For as long as the Government refuse to make real changes to the assessment process, vulnerable people will continue to be denied the help that they need.

It is shameful that this Government have extended Maximus's contract to carry out work capability assessments until 2021. The company has maximised its profits through work capability assessments despite the clear evidence that claimants have been denied access to the support they need. I am glad that private companies will be banned from carrying out assessments in the new Scottish devolved social security system, thanks to pressure from Scottish Labour. It is about time that claimants were treated with dignity and respect by the Government.

3.24 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing the debate, and on her excellent speech.

My office was involved in a work capability tribunal case last Wednesday and I have obtained permission from the person involved to discuss publicly what she has gone through because of such assessments. Sophie is the daughter of a friend of mine. Her mum and I trained 20 years ago as nurses and we worked all those years together on a ward at Lincoln County Hospital, so I know her really well. I provided Sophie with a letter for her tribunal, as her MP, as a qualified nurse and as someone who has known her for 20 years, before and after her diagnosis of multiple sclerosis.

Sophie tries hard to live as normal a life as she can, but I have seen how her illness affects her ability to do that day to day. She is just 30 years old and she was diagnosed with relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis at the age of 16 when she first developed balance difficulties. Over the following years she has developed problems with weakness, particularly on the right side of her body, as well as urinary difficulties, pain, fatigue and visual problems. She uses a wheelchair and struggles with mobility.

We went on a hen weekend in February; Sophie is my friend's best friend, and we were in Boston. Everywhere we went she was in a wheelchair, and she simply cannot get out and about on her own. Whereas some patients with relapsing MS are unaffected between attacks, Sophie has chronic symptoms and is affected by her MS every day. The symptoms fluctuate markedly, and even mild infections and changes in temperature can make things much worse. There were complications during a trial treatment—I remember Alison and I and a few of us looked really hard to try to get her on trials to control what she had. There was a drug called alemtuzumab. Sophie now has an overactive thyroid and has to have regular blood tests to monitor her blood levels of thyroxine.

[Karen Lee]

Sophie left school at 18 and trained as a nursery nurse. She worked at a nursery. She loved that job; it was one of her bits of normal. Eventually, though, she had to give up her job because of her MS, and after being forced by her disability to do that she applied for employment and support allowance benefits.

Recently, after a medical review, Sophie was deemed fit to work. The reasons given were that she has no problem with balance, uses public transport on her own and takes herself places independently. The truth is that she wears a support on one of her legs at all times, as I saw when we stayed for the weekend in February, because she drags the leg as she walks. She has to use a wheelchair every time she goes out of the house. She cannot walk any but short distances indoors, so how she is supposed to use public transport is totally beyond me.

The person who completed the assessment was allegedly competent to do it. Yet at the tribunal last week, those hearing the evidence seemed surprised that the case ever got as far as a tribunal and dismissed it in less than 10 minutes. They said something about a level 2 out of 3; I do not understand the terminology—but that is how ill Sophie is, although she had been deemed fit to work.

When someone is deemed fit to work, the process is that they have to appeal the decision if they feel it is wrong. Sophie appealed, but her appeal was dismissed because, I am told, the only evidence that the DWP will consider is the examination on the day, which came to such worryingly inaccurate conclusions. Sophie was therefore forced to take her case to a tribunal. That was eventually successful, but she should never have been put through such an anxiety-inducing ordeal. She is pregnant—she has a little boy of two and is about eight months pregnant, and the assessment came on top of all those other things in her life. I am sorry—it gets really upsetting, because I know her and what has happened to her is disgusting.

For people like Sophie it feels as if the DUP—*[Interruption.]*—I am sorry. That was a Freudian slip, and I meant no offence. It feels as if the DWP is working backwards from the conclusion that they are fit to work, regardless of the severity of their disability. That practice must end. Support must be given to the most vulnerable in society.

It has become popular in recent years to demonise those who are forced to claim benefits—to label them as somehow being scroungers or as faking their disability. Just after Christmas, I watched “I, Daniel Blake” on TV, and a prominent Conservative MP said on Twitter that it is only a film, but actually it mirrors real life, and people need to realise that. It is high time that the Government woke up to the fact that the vulnerable in society are suffering because of what they have done to our welfare system. It is meant to be the safety net for those who need it. People say that the mark of a decent society is how it looks after its vulnerable people. I am sorry, Sir Henry, but at present the reality is that the system is broken.

3.29 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for North

West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this important debate, and on her consistent opposition to measures introduced by this Government that are calculated to push people in financial hardship further into poverty. She has been a genuinely welcome Member of the House; we need more people who are as passionate and who have that integrity to stand up for their constituents. I stand with her in opposition to the work capability assessment, and agree that the whole system needs to be redrawn.

I welcome the Minister to his new post, and I hope he will continue—as he has done—to listen to views from across the House, including suggestions about how to reshape the system so that it works better for people. I appreciate that that is a tall order because, with all due respect to the civil servants, his Department has probably had the fastest revolving door for Ministers of any Government Department, although they have all had a fairly mixed tenure. Without the work of the civil servants to keep things running, this Government would come to a standstill.

The hon. Lady highlighted the impact of work capability assessments and their tragic, life-ending consequences. That gets to the heart of today’s debate, and that is why the Government must take action—the consequences are too significant. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) rightly paid tribute to our parliamentary and constituency staff, as well as to Money Matters, Citizens Advice, and all those charities and organisations that work with people on a daily basis. These vulnerable people in our society require our support. The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), who I had not heard speak before, made an emotional speech that went to the heart of this debate and reminded us of the emotion and humanity surrounding this issue. We do our jobs day in, day out, but this issue is affecting people’s lives.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) rightly said that a Labour Government introduced this policy, but he should not take all the credit for the social security system in Scotland, as a few other people had a hand in it as well. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) highlighted the damaging impact of this system, and the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk)—he is no longer in his place—said that we need to get this right first time. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said that by using the private sector we are simply passing the buck, but it is our responsibility to get this right.

The number of appeals against decisions made during work capability assessments is testament to the fact that the system does not work. I could recount the statistics, but the Minister will then stand up and tell me contrary figures, and I do not want to swap statistics any more on this matter. This is about real people’s lives, and unlike the revolving door of Ministers, and unlike the different Governments who have presided over this policy, it is time that we took responsibility and got the issue right, rather than kicking it even further down the road.

MPs have supported constituents through the mandatory reconsideration process, and our staff have had to deal with that consuming and emotionally draining process. Ultimately, however, this is about the people affected, and the devastating impact that the process has on

individual lives when we get it wrong. It takes such a long time to overturn a decision that we fail to recognise the significant consequences of that decision on individuals.

The Work and Pensions Committee made a number of suggestions in 2017, and noted the flaws in the assessment process. People were being asked “medically inappropriate questions”, and there was a mismatch between what assessors heard and what was written in their reports. Some assessors overlooked certain aspects of disabilities or illnesses, including mental illness and conditions such as fibromyalgia or ME. Such conditions can be deceptive, and medical professionals who have not seen them before can often miss them, and we must therefore consider those severe flaws in the process.

As I said in a previous debate, I was invited to witness an acted out version of an assessment. If I am honest, I found the whole thing a bit ridiculous because it took an hour and a half, although I was told at the start that it would take 40 minutes. It felt as if I was having a wee play performed for me about how the process would work in an ideal world, but in reality that is not how things work. That is not the experience of my constituents or those people we have heard about today.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) named many individual cases. Tragically, there are many more examples of people who have ended their lives as a result of this process. These are vulnerable people, and we have a responsibility to do more. With all due respect to the Minister, I know he will stand up and restate the Government line. That is fine, but it does nothing for people who are sitting at home right now and going through this process.

The Government have announced plans to combine the assessment processes, but I am not sure how much comfort that will bring to my constituents, or any of the people we have heard about today. It is true that they might not have to go through repeated questions and the needless extra stress of multiple examinations, but they will still have to go through the assessment process and the devil will be in the detail. Many disabled people receive only one kind of benefit, so I see no real benefit to that solution, which is the only one on the table right now.

I call on the Minister to get this right. I am tired of coming to Westminster Hall, on any given day of the week or time, to hear another new Minister who will not last very long and has not really managed to get any further down the road. I hope this Minister will be different, and I call on him to listen to the voices in this House, take action and do something.

3.36 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) on securing this debate. I thank all organisations that have provided briefings for it, and commend the excellent campaigning work of so many disabled activists, including those from Disabled People Against Cuts, who have shown that through direct action, our voices can be heard. I welcome the Minister to his new post, and I, too, hope he lasts longer than his predecessors. I look forward to working with him to try to make a difference.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham made an excellent opening speech that highlighted the flaws in the unfit-for-purpose assessment framework, and the inadequacies of the assessment. She eloquently described the impact of poor decision making, and the flaws in the process that so many individuals have to go through. These ill and disabled people have to endure weeks, if not months on end, of waiting to receive the vital social security support to which they are entitled. She rightly highlighted the damning report from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which stated that this Government have caused a systematic violation of the rights of disabled people. She also highlighted the harrowing experiences of so many people, which I will come on to later in my speech.

This afternoon hon. Members from across the House have shared their testimonies and paid tribute to their casework teams. We MPs are picking up a lot of this casework. We heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Lincoln (Karen Lee), and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), and from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), to name just a few.

Ten years on from its introduction, the unfit-for-purpose assessment continues to cause unnecessary harm. I admit that the work capability assessment was flawed from its inception, in that it fails to assess a person's ability to work, instead relying on a series of functional descriptors that do not reflect the real world of work or the barriers to it. Under the coalition Government in 2012, WCA criteria were revised and the descriptors changed, making the test more restrictive. Once assessed, a person was placed in one of two groups: limited capability for work, or limited capability for work and work-related activity. In 2017, however, the Government did the unthinkable and abolished the work-related activity group component for employment and support allowance and universal credit. That denied nearly 500,000 ill and disabled people almost £30 per week, and chose to ignore the additional costs and distance from the labour market that are faced by ill and disabled people.

All hon. Members here have mentioned the outsourcing of assessments. Since 2010, more than £1 billion has been paid to private contractors, including Atos and Maximus, which have repeatedly failed, even by the DWP's own performance standards. Despite those failures, the DWP recently announced that it will be extending the contract for Maximus until 2021. Does the Minister not agree that instead of extending the contract for a further 16 months, it is about time that we ended the privatisation of the assessments and brought them back in-house? I also ask the Minister to publish the contract and its terms, and how much it is going to cost, as his predecessor promised.

Members have told heartbreaking stories about the failures of the outsourced assessments, such as that of Larry Newman, who was assessed by Atos, was awarded zero points, and died of lung problems soon after. Healthcare professionals are asking inappropriate and offensive questions, and are compiling inaccurate reports. Citizens Advice says that 81% of its advisers have seen assessment reports that contain inaccuracies.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Marsha De Cordova: I am sorry; I have to keep going.

The flawed WCA has led to inaccurate and poor decision making. Some 74% of decisions on ESA are overturned at appeal, but less than a quarter of ESA cases are overturned at mandatory reconsideration. As a result, many are forced to go to appeal tribunals, which, according to Citizens Advice, have an average waiting time of 30 weeks. That is 30 weeks without vital social security support. In 2017, the DWP spent £120 million challenging the cases at appeal tribunals. When will the Minister act to address the failure of the mandatory reconsideration stage?

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham mentioned all the cases that drop out of the system before even getting to mandatory reconsideration or appeal stage. Do we record that information? If not, does the Minister not agree that it is time to start recording and calculating the number of people who are falling out of the system? Will the Minister also share how much it costs to administer ESA appeals?

It is good that the ESA65B letter will be revised for the summer. Will the Minister pause any further distribution of those letters to GPs?

Perhaps the biggest failure of the work capability assessment lies in its role as a cause of and contributor to mental distress for ill and disabled people. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth listed all the people who took their life in 2017. This is just not good enough. The Government recently revealed that 5,690 people died six months after being found fit for work. That is unacceptable. These are people like Stephen Smith, who was found fit for work, despite having multiple illnesses. He died last week, and we send our condolences to his family and friends, because this is not an acceptable situation. There is no stronger indictment of a failing system than thousands dying months after being denied vital social security support—the support that is supposed to be the safety net for the most vulnerable in our society.

It is time to scrap the failing system. It is not time to merge or integrate ESA, universal credit and personal independence payments. As long as two assessments are deeply flawed, combining them will only expose individuals to the risk of two adverse decisions as opposed to one.

This is a cruel and callous assessment framework, which has created a hostile environment for disabled people. Labour, disabled people and disabled people's organisations are clear that we need to scrap the work capability assessment immediately and replace it with an assessment framework that treats disabled people with the dignity and respect that they deserve. We need to end this hostile environment.

3.44 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry; you have expertly managed the timekeeping. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock). I know this is an area that she has campaigned on since she was first elected, and she does so with real passion and a determination to see improvements right across the system. That was echoed by all speakers. I might not have agreed with absolutely every point—hon. Members would not expect me to—but it is clear that there is a

real desire to see continued improvement and an emphasis on how important that improvement is to people who are going through the process.

The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) highlighted a particular story, which I was very touched by. I would like to meet her to discuss it further, as I think there are lessons to be learned from that case. I am certainly sorry for the experience that person has gone through.

This area is a real priority for me. I have been the Minister for Disabled People before, when I was a Parliamentary Under-Secretary. I have been an elected representative for 19 years, so I recognise the comments—we see first-hand through our casework instances where things have not gone right. I have spent my parliamentary career being proactive, working with MPs across the House, and stakeholders, charities and experts in this area. I listen to what is said, I try to do my best to make improvements and I certainly hope that that was reflected in my record as Minister for Disabled People last time. I will continue in the same vein.

The Government are focused on this area, and we have rightly increased funding for those with disabilities and long-term health conditions. This year, we are expected to spend £55 billion, which is a £10 billion increase in real terms since we came to office. It is a record high and it is 2.5% of GDP, which is higher than the spend of any other G7 country. It is 6% of total Government spending, and I think every penny is rightly supported by the wider public.

The debate today is focused on the 10-year anniversary of the work capability assessment, which I note a few speakers did acknowledge was introduced by the last Labour Government. Clearly, it was not perfect and there has been much-needed improvement since its introduction. We are all committed to playing our part in improving the process and to taking account of the developments in healthcare, modern workplaces and flexible working arrangements.

Backing up those improvements were the five independent reviews. The first three were carried out by Professor Harrington and the final two were carried out by Dr Litchfield. More than 100 recommendations were made that we have accepted and delivered. As the Secretary of State set out in her recent speech, we need to do more, and that is a real priority.

Many people have highlighted concerns with the frontline staff and process. Since 2015, the Centre for Health and Disability Assessments has taken over the delivery of the work capability assessment, and the focus has been on improving the operational process. It has increased the number of healthcare professionals by 82% and 1,300 staff are now directly involved in supporting assessments. It has increased the number of assessment rooms and significantly improved the training programme—many speakers highlighted these issues, in particular in relation to individual conditions. There is broad training on disability analysis and on specific conditions, including multiple and complex conditions, which covers three distinct areas—principles and professional standards; the assessment process; and scrutiny and file work, with an emphasis on quality. Training is predominantly modular, with competency testing at every stage. The healthcare professional must then undergo the continuing medical education programme and is

subject to regular case reviews and audits. For complex cases, we expect the healthcare professional to refresh knowledge prior to the assessment.

One very important and welcome addition that has begun to be rolled out is the introduction of customer champions. I absolutely recognise just how anxious and nervous people can be when going for assessment. I absolutely get that. The customer champion can assist those claimants, before and after assessments, to ensure that they receive the best service. We have had good feedback on that, and the intention is that there will be one in every single assessment centre.

I also recognise the comments about communication—the brown envelopes coming through. There is a commitment from me to work further with stakeholders to improve the letters that come out. I have seen this as a constituency MP; I have taken a deep breath at the poor quality of some communications. We need to improve that.

Karen Lee: Does the Minister agree that subjecting people who have either a chronic illness, such as multiple sclerosis, or a terminal illness to these kinds of work capability assessments is totally unacceptable?

Justin Tomlinson: I cannot give a broad-brush answer. I know what the hon. Lady is saying and I am coming on to the use of evidence and how we can do more earlier and, potentially, then with paper-based assessments. I will come on to that. I understand, but I cannot give a definitive answer, because every claimant has their own unique challenges that have to be addressed.

In addition, SMS text message reminders about appointments have been welcomed, and there has been a lot of work on the website, which includes mock assessment videos so that people can get an idea of the sort of things to expect. Those things are all looking to remove some of the anxiety and worry about assessments. There is more to be done in that area, but we recognise that.

The improvements in the training and the extra healthcare professionals have meant that median clearance time halved from 25 weeks in March 2015 to 10 weeks in 2018, and customer satisfaction has exceeded the 92% target since that point. However, that does not mean that we are getting it right every time, and that is what I want to turn to now in focusing on MR and appeals.

All of us as Members are frustrated when what seem to be clear-cut cases come to our constituency surgeries asking for our help. There are times when we think, “How on earth can this have happened?”, and ultimately the person could have a very long appeal process to go through to get the right decision. In the majority of cases, appeals are successful because of additional oral and written evidence. That has to be addressed. We rightly are going to tackle it and will do so in two stages—first, with the MR process. We have started doing this with PIP. We are seeking to contact the claimant who is disputing a decision and talk to them directly to get the additional oral and, potentially, written evidence at that stage to see whether we can improve decisions at that point, rather than waiting for the evidence to come at the end of the appeal process.

Debbie Abrahams: Does the Minister think that it is unacceptable that any Government policy should cause their citizens to take their own life or to die? If he does, should there not be a moratorium on this policy until it is got right? Surely one death is one too many.

Justin Tomlinson: We all recognise that suicide is a tragic and complex issue, and we take it extremely seriously. We take the death of any claimant seriously and, where we are made aware that a person has died and it is suggested that that might be associated with the DWP directly, a review will be undertaken to identify whether any lessons can be learned and can be actioned.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: Let me make some progress, because this is a very important point about the MR process. We are in the early stages with a new way of looking at MRs, but there have been very positive results, and we will now roll this out to all the PIP dispute sites. We intend to do the same for the ESA sites as well.

The second stage has to do with the appeal process. Again, we recognise that people will submit additional, late written and oral evidence.

Patricia Gibson rose—

Justin Tomlinson: Let me just make this point. I want to explain one of the challenges. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), talked about a 30-week wait, in some cases, for an appeal. The person may have got the additional evidence in week six, but then the system is saying, “I’m sorry, but you’re going to have wait another 24 weeks until we can actually take that into account.” That is clearly not an ideal situation, so we are looking at how we can lapse appeals, where there is new evidence, to reconsider the decision with the additional evidence and be able then to give them a different decision. If we do not think that that should change the decision, they have the right to carry on right through to the final appeal process, but if it is something that is clearly going to change the decision, we should act as quickly as possible.

Patricia Gibson: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: In a second. Over the past five years, only 4% of work capability assessment ESA decisions have been revised at appeal, but we recognise that it is in no one’s interest that things should be picked up only after a lengthy appeal process, so we are absolutely committed to being proactive in this area, and this issue will be a real priority.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I just wanted to ask for clarification on one point that he made, which was about appeals being successful because of new or additional information. How does he respond, then, to the fact that people who go on to appeal do so on the basis that the information that they see about themselves is badly or very badly expressed and incorrect, and to Citizens Advice saying that 81% of the customers it sees have inaccurate information recorded about them, which leads to a wrong decision?

Justin Tomlinson: I am coming on to how we can do more to ensure that the right evidence is put into the system at the earliest possible moment and in the right way. We do not want people who should be getting support to have to go through a lengthy process unnecessarily. We all agree on that, and I hope that hon. Members can see that what I am describing is an

[Justin Tomlinson]

important improvement. It is still at an early stage, but as I have seen in previous debates, it is the sort of thing that stakeholders want us to do, and we are rightly going to take it forward.

Let me come on to the point about evidence. It is referring to the integrated service. There is a bit of confusion in terms of what people thought that this would be. The view was that it ultimately would be a panacea whereby people would go for one single assessment for PIP and for the work capability assessment. The reality is that very few people apply for both benefits at a similar point in time. However, for the very few people who do, it might make sense for them to have, if they wish, both of the assessments on the same day instead of having to come in on the Monday and then again on the Wednesday. That may be what people want to do, but we are talking about very small numbers.

The thrust of this is to share evidence if the claimant wishes that to be done. One point that many hon. Members made was about the challenge that often arises of getting the evidence, whether from the GP, the physiotherapist or the hospitals, in a timely manner and in a way that is helpful for their assessment. If they have managed to do that once and they would like us to use that evidence again, with their consent, that is something that we would seek to do as part of building the new digital system and ensuring that the claimant has consistent, better information. Being able to share evidence will reduce the burden of providing the same evidence multiple times. It could potentially lead to fewer face-to-face assessments if we can gather crucial, vital, clear-cut evidence earlier in the claim.

I want to pay tribute to all the stakeholders, the medical experts, the charities and all the MPs across the House who regularly engage on this issue. Over the coming months, we will be doing a series of roundtables and regional events to gather further evidence, with a real emphasis on those with real experience of this area, so that we can further improve the system. We want to build trust, transparency and consistency and we want to improve the claimant's experience through a more

personalised and tailored approach. As a returning Minister, I am committed to supporting disabled people and those with long-term health conditions to claim and receive the benefits to which they are entitled and to ensuring that people are treated fairly and with dignity. I thank all the Members across the House who have contributed today.

3.58 pm

Laura Pidcock: I thank all the hon. Members who came to the Chamber today to share the painful experiences of their constituents. I pay tribute to my excellent caseworkers, who work day in and day out to try to get justice for people who are subject to the abuses of the state. I express solidarity also with all the disability rights campaign groups and advice services.

It is a real shame that not one Conservative Member came to the debate or prepared a speech and showed their constituents that they cared. They will have people who are subject to the work capability assessment, and I think that their absence is symbolic of their complicity in the system. This Minister is now in control of the system, so warm words and sympathy are not enough. The Minister has control, so action is necessary.

I want to stress this point in the 30 seconds that I have left. It is just not true that additional evidence is what wins at appeal. It is often evidence that the DWP could have had, and the evidence that people go and give in the initial assessment is the same as that at the appeal stage, so this is not about blaming advice and support agencies or the person for not giving the evidence in the first place. The evidence is there; it is the system that is flawed. The language is also an issue. They are not claimants or customers; they are people who are entitled to this support by the state.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered 10 years of the work capability assessment in relation to employment and support allowance and universal credit.

4 pm

Sitting suspended.

NHS: North-West London

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the NHS in north west London.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to see so many of my Labour colleagues from north-west London here to support this debate. It will be a relatively short debate on a rather lengthy subject, so I will try to keep my remarks concise, or at least as well ordered and structured as I can. To that end, I will touch on two subjects, and perhaps mention one or two other issues. The first subject is the collapse or withdrawal of the “Shaping a healthier future” programme, which was principally around the reorganisation of acute care; the second is the commercial Babylon GP at Hand service, which is distorting the primary care market, and not just in Hammersmith and Fulham, or indeed in north-west London.

I will begin by reflecting on how we got to where we are. In 2012, “Shaping a healthier future” was heralded as the biggest hospital reorganisation programme in the history of the NHS, but was quickly called the biggest closure programme in its history. It was a scheme for closing four of the nine type 1 A&Es across north-west London, and completely restructuring, demolishing and—in common parlance—closing two of its major hospitals, Ealing and Charing Cross, which is in my constituency. When the scheme was announced, it was unambiguous that it was about saving money. It was part of a programme to save about £1 billion, and we were told that if it did not happen, the NHS in that area would go bankrupt. Those were literally the words that were used. Much water has flowed under the bridge over the past seven years, until almost exactly a month ago, when the scheme was withdrawn wholesale in a rather hole-in-the-corner way.

This is something of a bittersweet debate. I do not know anybody in north-west London who is not delighted that the scheme for hospital closures has been withdrawn, yet because of the way those seven years have been wasted and how the scheme has been dealt with over that time, we are left with as many questions as have been answered. I do not have time to go through the whole history of those seven years. Suffice it to say that Charing Cross Hospital is the second-largest hospital of the nine in its sub-region; it has 360 beds, almost all acute. It was to be demolished. It was to lose more than 300 of those beds—more than 90%. It was to lose all of its major emergency services and its A&E, and effectively be replaced by what was called a local hospital, with primary care and treatment facilities. In other words, it would have been a very radical shake-up.

Throughout the process, there was a frustrating lack of honesty; there was no admission of what the scheme was, certainly not at a political level. If someone drilled down into the business plan or clinical strategy, it was clear what was being advocated. We were told that in some way, the increase in community services and primary care that was also part of the “Shaping a healthier future” scheme would make up for the loss of those

hundreds of acute beds and those A&E facilities. It is now commonly accepted that this was always an entirely misconceived plan, as the King’s Fund—to give just one example—has said. Given the rise in demand, the best that could be hoped for was that if the increases in primary and other care services took place, we would be able to cope with the current amount of acute capacity.

The idea that we could dramatically reduce capacity was entirely misconceived. That is not conjecture; it was proven in 2014, when stage 1 of “Shaping a healthier future” went ahead, with the closure of the A&Es at Hammersmith Hospital and Central Middlesex Hospital. We were told that as those were not two of the main A&E departments, those closures would easily be coped with. However, demand at St Mary’s, Northwick Park and Charing Cross went up to such an extent that they had some of the worst waiting time figures of anywhere in the country. Since then, those figures have come down only slowly and gradually.

I hope that the Government and the health service will learn lessons from this scheme—that is probably the best gloss I can put on this. It has taken a huge amount of time and effort, and a huge amount of money wasted by the health service, to get to where we are today, which is effectively back to where we were seven years ago. In 2012, it looked as though the situation was hopeless, and I have to praise Ealing Council, which was then Labour-controlled. At that stage, Hammersmith and Fulham Council was under Conservative control, and from 2013 onwards it fully backed the closure strategy. Ealing Council stood absolutely solid and firm; it mounted a judicial review, and opposed those proposals from day one.

When there was a change of political control in 2014, that council was joined by Hammersmith and Fulham Council, which, together with surrounding Labour councils, set up the Mansfield commission under Michael Mansfield. That independent commission looked at the “Shaping a healthier future” proposals, and when it reported, it said that those proposals would be a health disaster for the area. By that stage, the sustainability and transformation plans had been introduced. In a way, it is regrettable—although it was the right thing to do—that both Hammersmith and Ealing councils refused to participate, because they knew how damaging “Shaping a healthier future” and the hospital closures would be for the area.

Over all that time, I do not think a week went by in which I did not deal with this issue, both here and in the constituency. There was a sustained campaign of what I can only call disinformation. A lot of money—£72 million is a conservative estimate—was spent on consultants, preparing for the “Shaping a healthier future” programme. All of that money was wasted. Despite the fact that we relied entirely on internal health service documents to prove what was being planned, I was constantly told by everyone from the then Prime Minister down that we were scaremongering, and that the proposals were sensible and helpful.

It is curious that when the Health Secretary announced the withdrawal of “Shaping a healthier future” a month ago, the Government withdrew support from the scheme, as if somebody else had thought it up. Until that point, we had been told every day and every week for seven years that it was a sensible scheme, which would only improve resources and services within the health service. It is to be regretted that the Government did not sit

[*Andy Slaughter*]

down with politicians, campaigners, local residents and the local health service to talk through where we were and where we were going. Instead, in a rather hole-in-the-corner way, they used the contrived trick of using a planted question from a Conservative Back Bencher to announce withdrawing from the scheme. That does not bode well for the future.

Although we are extremely pleased that the programme has been cancelled, and that both Ealing Hospital and Charing Cross Hospital will stay open, where do we go now? First, Charing Cross Hospital has the largest maintenance backlog—£300 million—of any hospital in the country. That was clearly not under consideration, because it was intended that the structure would be demolished. In actual fact, the capital moneys are simply not there to have done that in any event.

The other hospitals in the area, including West Middlesex, Chelsea and Westminster and St Mary's, were promised that they would benefit from the closures, and that there would be substantial investment. My question to the Minister is: what is the plan going forward? For political expediency, the Government have bailed out of "Shaping a healthier future", and we are grateful for that, but where do we go now? Certainly the clinicians and the managers in west London cannot answer those questions. This thing has been entirely derived and supported by the Conservative party and this Government. It is for them to answer that question, rather than simply leaving our local health service to stew in that way.

Before I move on, I want to say that some of the staunchest campaigners have turned up to listen to this debate. I last saw them at the victory party at Hammersmith town hall a couple of weeks ago. Without their contribution, we would not be here. They countered well funded, well resourced and entirely disingenuous statements about what would happen to the health service. Every week, rain or shine, they were out talking to and converting the local population. One could say that the local population might not need much conversion to preserve a much-loved, major local hospital that has just celebrated its 200th anniversary, but the reality is that that needed to be done, because millions were being spent on spinning the yarn that the changes would be good for local health services. The campaign was not based simply on sentiment or popular feeling. It was well researched, and well supported with independent clinical evidence. The campaign was based on the day-to-day, week-to-week, absolute dedication of people who worked for nothing, and had nothing in common other than their love of the national health service and their feeling that Government at all levels had got it wrong.

With that, I will move to another topic, GP at Hand, which the Minister probably does know something about. We have become increasingly alarmed at its trajectory. For those who do not know, GP at Hand is a digital app provided by a private company called Babylon Health. The service has raised an enormous amount of concern at different levels; I will narrow that to four points.

The first and most obvious concern is how GP at Hand works. It attaches itself to a particular bricks-and-mortar GP practice—in this case, a particular surgery in Fulham. It was an orthodox GP surgery with a list of around 4,000 patients before that association began. As of today, it is approaching 50,000 patients, and is one of

the largest GP practices in the country. That distortion has a cost implication for the clinical commissioning group, initially in Hammersmith and Fulham. It is estimated that over the two years from 2018 to 2020, that distortion alone will cost the CCG about £26 million. There is no provision for that at the moment, and that has to be addressed. I would like to hear from the Minister that there is a scheme for addressing that, and that there will be full reimbursement of those costs.

For those who are not aware of how the system works, it is very straightforward. When patients sign up to a GP practice, the money effectively goes with them. What is not anticipated is that there will suddenly be a tenfold increase in a patient list over one or two years. Why is that money not simply redirected? It has been, to some extent, to the CCGs in west and north-west London, but the money is not provided to the much wider catchment area—GP at Hand now serves not only Greater London and a wider travel area, but has expanded to Birmingham—because those other CCGs are saying, "Hang on." A digital app of this kind attracts a certain type of patient: younger, fitter patients—effectively those without complex medical conditions or co-morbidities. They do not take up a lot of the GP's time, as their issues are relatively simple and straightforward to deal with. Often they do not contact the GP at all for long periods.

Those patients effectively subsidise older and sicker patients. There is a perfectly understandable resistance from local GPs and CCGs to allowing those patients to escape, leaving them only with the most demanding and least cost-effective patients. If the issue is not addressed, the problem that results for my CCG is an annually increasing bill, going from £10 million to £16 million and who knows what beyond that, with no provision for that in any way.

The second concern, which has been expressed by clinicians and those who have simply tested out the app, is whether the app—like other apps, it is based on algorithms and diagnostic tools—is accurate and good enough. Has it been sufficiently tested? It is growing logarithmically across the country. It is not a question of it perhaps being tested in a small area and got absolutely right before it moves on. It could be in your constituency tomorrow, Sir Christopher, and it could be across the entire country in a year or two.

The third issue is that GP at Hand is driven entirely by a single commercial provider. It is a way of doing digitisation, but it is the way of the wild west to simply allow one particular firm to start from one location and expand across the country at a rate that it determines, controlled only by its advertising budget and its ability to attract customers. In my submission, there is no thought behind how that is done. The NHS is jumping to the tune that is being played by GP at Hand. One might suggest that it should be the other way around.

The fourth and perhaps most contentious issue is the fact that this particular private provider has had the support of the Secretary of State for Health from the beginning. He is a subscriber and has written about it in glowing terms. Whenever the matter is raised in the House and he is responding, at Health questions or wherever else, he has only praise to give it, but he is partial to this. Not only is that of concern in itself, but it means that when one is talking to local, regional and even national organisations within the NHS—this is

now a national issue—they are looking over their shoulder, because their boss or their boss's boss is saying, "This is the future and this is what is going to happen."

With the support of a number of colleagues, I have written today to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, asking the Committee to undertake an investigation into GP at Hand. I know that she shares a lot of my concerns, so I am hopeful that that investigation will follow. I ask the Minister to give what assurances she can on those four points that I have raised.

Sir Christopher, I can see you are looking at the clock, and my colleagues are looking at me with daggers drawn, so I will speak for one more minute and then sit down. That means that I cannot go into detail about the other local health service issues, which will have to wait for another day. Suffice it to say—I will give a lightning portrait—that in Hammersmith and Fulham, we have a number of failing GP practices that are either suspended or require improvement. We have planned substantial cuts to our CCGs of £30 million. We have cuts planned to palliative care, community care and the hospital sector, including a proposal to close the hydrotherapy pool at Charing Cross Hospital. Everybody who has been involved in that has told me that it provides an invaluable service.

The overall picture is one of declining and reducing services. Only yesterday, a letter informed us that the "Beyond places of safety" scheme, which is very good, has been suspended because the funding is not there. There is no pretence any more that we are restructuring services, or reducing such things as management costs—that has all been done. What is being cut now are basic and essential services from the community, primary and indeed acute sectors.

I will conclude, as colleagues want to contribute to the debate. I hope that the Minister appreciates the seriousness, complexity and universality of the cuts that are happening across the health service. I hope that she will be more magnanimous than some of her colleagues in admitting the mistake that was made over "Shaping a healthier future". We can turn the page and move on. We all want to work together for improved health, but first, some of these issues have to be addressed.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. The wind-ups will start at quarter past 5, and five Members wish to catch my eye. I believe in self-regulation; you can do the maths for yourselves. I call Mr Virendra Sharma.

4.51 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and congratulate him on securing this important debate.

North-west London has been a guinea pig—unloved and uncared for in the testing of a failed experiment. It has taken our local NHS trust and the Secretary of State all this time to recognise what we have been saying for years. When I say "us", I mean not just Members of this House, but doctors, nurses, clinicians and, most

importantly, patients and the local community. The "Shaping a healthier future" programme was not fit for purpose. It did not work, and it did not deliver for those who needed it most.

Two weeks ago, I attended a party in Ealing—my hon. Friend mentioned that he had one in Hammersmith—celebrating the end of "Shaping a healthier future". My constituents were ecstatic. I have rarely seen more strongly held convictions than those they had that lives were being put at risk by the scheme. The cancellation of the programme is the greatest gift that we could have been given. It was almost an Easter miracle. Ealing Hospital, Charing Cross Hospital and others in the area can now rise from the dead and continue to serve our constituents.

However, those hospitals remain broken—not yet whole again. Ealing Hospital has lost full A&E services, which we badly need. We have lost our maternity ward and in-patient paediatric care. I remember, only a few years ago, spending time with volunteers in that area helping to raise funds for a publicly paid-for refurbishment of that children's ward. It now lies empty. The garden we built is un-played in, and the swings are still. Its closure was a slap in the face to hospital users and the patients' group. Parents felt un-consulted—a theme that runs throughout the "Shaping a healthier future" programme. It always seemed to be a top-down programme: a project put on local people and led by Whitehall that was not what patients needed.

Thankfully, the scheme is now only a failed experiment, not an ongoing disaster, but the clearing and cleaning up still need time and effort. Local residents want to feel listened to. They want to feel that their needs are being placed at the centre of their care, not treated as a peripheral concern. I hope that the Minister can commit to restoring services to all our hospitals in north-west London, but—I would say, selfishly—particularly to Ealing Hospital, which is in my constituency.

The London Borough of Ealing has a very high number of young people, but suffers from one of the highest levels of lifestyle-led premature death. The widely reported Mansfield commission into the programme roundly condemned the "Shaping a healthier future" plans, and found that cuts were falling disproportionately on the poorest in society. Minister, please reverse the cuts and give my worst-off constituents a fair chance at healthy and full lives, unblighted by ill health.

4.56 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on introducing this timely debate. Before I say any more, I need to declare an interest: my husband is a non-executive director of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital Trust.

I congratulate the key people who have made this possible: the campaigners. They have worked tirelessly and, as my hon. Friend said, for no money for, I think, seven years now, to wake the community up about the implications of the loss of, initially, four hospitals. We have since lived through the closure of many services, the downgrading of Charing Cross Hospital and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) said, the downgrading and withdrawal of services at Ealing Hospital.

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

The issue is important to my constituents in a number of ways. First, for the residents of Chiswick, in the east side of my constituency, Charing Cross is their nearest hospital. It is the hospital that they look to for all the basic services, particularly A&E. It is the nearest and easiest to get to. They have rightly been really angry and worried about the loss of that hospital, as have residents in Hammersmith and other parts of west London—the places for which Charing Cross is the nearest and easiest hospital to get to. We have had many campaigners and many campaign days, signing petitions at public meetings and so on, in Chiswick over the last seven years.

The impact of the cuts to services, and the threat of cuts to services, in Charing Cross and Ealing in particular, have affected all residents across my constituency; for many of my constituents, Ealing is their nearest hospital. The other concern surrounds the impact on the general hospital in my constituency, the West Middlesex University Hospital, part of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital Trust. It has been very difficult for staff there to plan properly, and for patients to know what their future will be in terms of potential services.

The recent announcement on the ending of “Shaping a healthier future” was not entirely a surprise. We have heard nothing for months, if not years—no new information, and no new developments. However, A&E attendance has increased—by 11%, I think, at Charing Cross in recent years. The increasing pressure on Ealing and Charing Cross hospitals is not entirely surprising. Hon. Members for constituencies not only in London but throughout the country have said in debate after debate on the NHS that we are seeing more and more pressure on accident and emergency services as a result of our rising population, the withdrawal of basic primary care, and the cutbacks in adult social care and mental health services, as well as a whole host of other issues.

There is no way that the loss of significant accident and emergency services in west London could fail to cause incredible pressure on the remaining services and long journey times, given the levels of congestion in London. Another problem, as I know from many constituents who work at Charing Cross and Ealing hospitals, is the effect on staff morale: will people apply for a job in those hospitals, where they do not know how long their post will be available, or will they try for a vacancy in another hospital? The impact on morale, team building and team continuity is bound to have an effect—admittedly one difficult to measure—on patient care.

What we want to know from the Minister, given the ending of the “Shaping a healthier future” programme, is how the NHS estate, particularly the acute estate in north-west London, will be planned and financed in future. It feels as if we are in a strategic vacuum. When will we know whether there will be sufficient acute beds? The original plan was that the “Shaping a healthier future” programme would free up a load of capital to be spent in other hospitals around west London, including St Mary’s in Paddington, West Mid and so on, but where are the acute beds that are so desperately needed as A&E attendances rise? How will they be funded? What does all this mean for the future of integrated care organisations?

I share the concern of colleagues across west London about the shambles of the “Shaping a healthier future” programme’s initiation, continuation and end. I also share their concern about what will happen next.

5.2 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Six months ago, at the beginning of November, the walk-in centre at Alexandra Avenue in my constituency closed its doors for the last time. If there was ever a much-loved and vital service that told the story of the NHS funding crisis in north-west London, it was Alexandra Avenue. Its opening 10 years ago was strongly opposed by the Harrow West Conservative party and its then parliamentary candidate. She and the Harrow West Conservatives were not immediately successful in getting it closed, but in 2013 it was closed during weekdays; it was kept open at weekends, although only as a result of local campaigning. In November, the Conservatives finally got their way: a service that, at its height, provided a valuable walk-in service from 8 am to 8 pm, 365 days a year, to 40,000 people in my constituency and the surrounding constituencies, finally shut its doors.

Bluntly, the centre’s closure was a result of the clinical commissioning group’s lack of funding. The CCG has been put into special measures because its forecast deficit is £40 million, according to a written answer that I received in February from the then Minister, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine). Not surprisingly, it is under pressure to make a huge range of cuts, so not only is there no prospect that the Alexandra Avenue walk-in centre will be reopened, but other walk-in centres that serve Harrow are vulnerable to the threat of closure at a moment’s notice.

Nor is it surprising that the situation has had an impact on Northwick Park Hospital, which serves my constituency. It has not met the A&E waiting target for some considerable time: over the past five years, 25% of patients in A&E have not been seen within four hours, which gives a further indication of the decline in quality across the national health service in north-west London.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this debate and allowing me to ask the Minister a number of questions. When will the north-west London NHS be properly funded? When will there be an end to the sorry tale of the clinical commissioning group always finding itself in deficit? It is not that it cannot manage its books. It has had excellent chairs and an excellent board; I pay tribute to the outgoing chair, Dr Amol Kelshiker, and the new chair, Dr Genevieve Small, for their willingness and commitment, but they deserve to know that their CCG will be properly funded.

When will Northwick Park Hospital no longer have to face inadequate funding, like the other hospitals in the trust? When will those hospitals get the support that they need to get the consultants and nurses in place to meet their A&E targets? My hon. Friend mentioned the closure of Central Middlesex Hospital’s A&E service, which has had a huge impact on services in north-west London, including the services at Northwick Park Hospital that my constituents depend on. Frankly, it should be reopened, because we need that acute capacity. It would be good to hear whether the Minister could ever foresee such a scenario.

It is now clear that cancer waiting times are also under pressure in our community. For the first time, the maximum two-week wait for a first consultant appointment after an urgent GP referral is not being met, according to the latest data on our area.

Harrow clinical commissioning group needs to be properly funded, funding for the NHS in north-west London needs to be significantly increased, and—in my view—England's national health service needs a dedicated national fund for walk-in services in communities, such as my own, in which there is strong evidence of demand. I look forward to some positive reassurance from the Minister that the Conservative party has changed its attitude to walk-in services such as those at Alexandra Avenue in Rayners Lane.

5.7 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship for the second time today, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this short but important debate. He was quite right to use the word “bittersweet” in the context of the collapse of the “Shaping a healthier future” strategy. It was sweet, in that it lifted a shadow from Charing Cross Hospital. There has been a continuing surge in A&E admissions over many years, during which we have consistently been told that a strategic approach to health services should be about reducing such admissions and replacing them with services in the community. That is a principle that I think everyone would agree with, and the lifting of the shadow is a good thing, but as we have heard from other hon. Members, it is clear that the strategic shaping of healthcare in north-west London remains very much in doubt.

I will focus on St Mary's Hospital in Paddington, which is just outside my constituency but is the main hospital for it. It is the major acute provider for north-west London, and one of the four major trauma centres in London, with a 24/7 A&E department. It is a hospital very dear to my heart—it saved my life once, and I gave birth there—and it is held in very high regard among my constituents. Quite rightly, it has a terrific reputation for clinical care; we should never miss an opportunity to record our admiration for the staff, who deliver healthcare so superbly to the public.

None of that should blind us to a very grim reality, which is that St. Mary's Hospital is very old. In some instances, it is quite literally falling down. It is now 14 years since the Paddington health campus proposal finally collapsed, which was the first vision of the redevelopment of St. Mary's Hospital. Here we are in 2019, with the collapse of “Shaping a healthier future”, and we are still frozen in terms of a major redevelopment for St Mary's.

In January 2018, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust gained full planning permission for the first phase of the redevelopment of St. Mary's, which is a new eight-story out-patient and ambulatory service building on the site. The trust submitted the outline business case for the investment required to NHS Improvement, NHS England and the local commissioning groups. Under those plans, the trust is looking to house most of the St Mary's out-patient and ambulatory services in the new building, but this has been on hold since January 2018. It is not an academic issue; the failure to

gain funding and approval from key stakeholders for the redevelopment programme is a key risk on the trust's corporate risk register, because the conditions of St Mary's Hospital have deteriorated so much. Planning permission has only two years left.

While we are waiting for the funding to be put together for the redevelopment of the hospital within that timescale, the structural issues in the hospital have become absolutely and imminently challenging. The structural problems in the Cambridge wing at St Mary's resulted in two wards being out of use, with no possible value-for-money structural solution. There is a £1.3 billion backlog maintenance liability across the five hospitals, including St Mary's. As we have heard, the backlog is the biggest in the country, and St Mary's has the largest in the trust. In fact, 30% of all high-risk backlog maintenance in the NHS in England is at Imperial College Healthcare.

I just mentioned one of the wards that has been out of action, and St Mary's maternity services had to be temporarily relocated due to a lift fault in September 2018. The Grafton ward closed due to significant structural concerns, with the loss of 32 beds in May 2018 and no possible structural solution. A ceiling collapsed in the Thistlethwaite ward. The Paterson Centre was flooded and closed for two weeks, with the loss of activity and 20 surgical beds in 2017. Floods, electrical issues and drainage problems are commonplace across the buildings and services at St Mary's. The hospital simply cannot wait, yet everything is now frozen.

We urgently need advice from the Minister on how we will proceed. Should there be a further structural problem of the kind that we have already seen, it would not only be an imminent risk to patients, but would take out chunks of capacity from an already highly stretched hospital, which will have repercussions across the whole of north-west London. We simply cannot go on like this. I hope the Minister will give us an indication of how the St Mary's maintenance backlog, structural programme and redevelopment will proceed.

5.12 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Good news for a change from this Government, who have admitted that the crackpot “Shaping a healthier future” plan to cut the nine major hospitals in north-west London to five is not workable and has been killed off. It was always a David and Goliath battle.

I pay tribute to, on the one side, Ealing Save our NHS, which works shoulder to shoulder with Save our Hospitals Charing Cross and our two Labour councils, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) mentioned. They are people like Ollie, Eve, Arthur and Judy Breens, Aysha, Raj and Gill, who held protests and popped up at every carnival. They organised parties, lobbies and petitions, and distributed a quarter of a million leaflets, all of which were paid for out of rattling buckets and their own pockets.

On the other side, we had “Shaping a healthier future”, with its swanky offices in upmarket Marylebone. Tens of millions of pounds of NHS cash from the public purse was spent on private management consultants, who all mysteriously alleged that if they junked departments, A&Es and hundreds of beds, health outcomes would somehow improve. In the end, the figures did not work. Quelle surprise! They never worked.

[Dr Rupa Huq]

As early as 2012, John Lister pointed out in his report that the whole thing was a pile of nonsense, as did reports from the two councils, which involved the forensic skills of Sir Michael Mansfield, QC. Even then, seven years into a five-year-long failing plan, local health bosses were still carrying on as if the emperor were fully clothed. There was a heavy-handed threat of legal action against me, because my 2017 general election leaflets pointed out that it did not work. That arrived days after my mother passed away at Ealing Hospital—I know every bit of the hospital, right down to the morgue.

Where next? These disastrous Frankenstein plans have seen the two A&Es nearest to Acton Central—Middlesex and Hammersmith—completely shut their doors. I congratulate the Minister on her appointment, and my question to her is: can we have them back, as well as the stroke unit, paediatrics, maternity services and A&E admissions for children at Ealing? All these things mean that the figures for type 1 A&E urgent visits are going through the roof. No more babies are to be born at Ealing. As a mum, I recently had to schlep out of the borough for a paediatric appointment at the West Middlesex Hospital, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury).

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith said, we need a serious exercise in lessons learned from this whole sorry episode, rather than clinging on to defend the indefensible and denying that there are serious problems. Ealing Hospital remains perilously underfunded and in crisis. Staff morale has been sapped, as was pointed out, by all the uncertainty. We could go on and on about the Brexit effects—the EU nurses exiting in droves and the social care sector being hollowed out by this Government, who are obsessed with their £30,000 skills target.

The slaying of the beast that was “Shaping a healthier future,” which was always known locally as “Shafting a healthier future,” is not before time and has raised eyebrows, such is the cynicism of politics in our time. As we did at the Drayton Court Hotel in my constituency last week, let us eat, drink and be merry, because tomorrow there might be another election.

5.16 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this debate. I know that he is a passionate advocate for the NHS in his area. Although I am pleased to respond on behalf of Labour, it is with sadness that hon. Members have to come here over and over to explain the impact on their constituents of the crisis in the NHS.

We have heard a mixed message of plans made and abandoned. It is a story of a shambles, and declining and reducing services, including the loss of services for children, maternity and stroke care. It is no secret that the NHS is under extreme pressure. After nearly a decade of stagnant investment, coupled with a recruitment crisis and a retention time-bomb, the cracks are really starting to show, as we have just heard. The King's Fund notes that during the Labour Government, budget

growth in the NHS was an average of 3.7% a year. It has dropped to an average of 1% a year during the Conservatives' time in office. The recent announcements of additional funding are of course welcome. However, the British Medical Association and the King's Fund acknowledge that the promised £20.5 billion, which equates to an increase of 3.4%, is simply not enough after nine years of severe underfunding. It is not even enough to wipe out hospital deficits.

Where is the funding to guarantee sustainable health services in the face of ever-increasing demand from a complex and changing demographic? Where is the funding to renew NHS infrastructure or outdated hospital equipment? Just repairing the dilapidated hospital buildings will cost in excess of £3 billion. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) about the state of the buildings at St Mary's Hospital and the urgent work that is needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) outlined the refurbishment work that is urgently needed.

Of course, it is not all about money. I was brought up to believe that you get what you pay for. It is clear that if we do not invest much, we will not get much. Is it any wonder that we have a staffing crisis in the NHS? The Conservative Government's failure to provide adequate resource and support has created problems in both staff recruitment and retention. The Government continue to exploit the good will of dedicated NHS staff, many of whom are pushed to breaking point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) pointed out, staff morale is at an all-time low.

It is inconceivable that more and more hospitals should constantly face the threat of closure. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and the committed grassroots campaigners for their extensive work over many years to save these vital hospitals. These victories are really welcome, but the Hammersmith and Fulham CCG faces cuts of £30 million. Is it not disgraceful to hear, in the light of that, that £72 million was wasted on private consultants? It is astonishingly incompetent, above all else.

Of course, the cuts to the CCG forced it to reduce urgent care, local GP hours and access to primary care, which is short-sighted as it causes suffering for constituents and often leads to more expensive or hospital treatments. It seems that the Health Secretary's only answer is to focus on technology. I agree that technology has a role to play in the future delivery of NHS services, but we must proceed with caution. Patients' needs are paramount, and we must ensure that their safety is never compromised.

I share my hon. Friend's concern about the use of online GPs. It is clear that the app providing access to such services, GP at Hand, will be very convenient for some people, and is likely to appeal to younger patients. Indeed, Ipsos MORI found that 87% of all GP at Hand patients are aged between 20 and 39. It is also likely that online GPs will prove attractive to patients with less complex medical needs, leaving the providers open to the accusation of cherry-picking. They are undoubtedly delivering a service for which there is demand, but the fact remains that many patients need to attend a traditional GP consultation.

Of course, many patients do not know when they register with an online GP that they are deregistered from their GP surgery. That has serious consequences for the financial viability of the traditional surgery.

Hammersmith and Fulham CCG has paid £10 million to GP at Hand. That money is no longer paid to local surgeries, which are as busy as ever catering for patients with multiple complex needs, and their overheads are still as great as they ever were. It is imperative that the funding model for the delivery of GP services is adjusted to reflect the fact—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I have interrupted the hon. Lady, because we must hear from the Minister and time is very limited.

Julie Cooper: I will sum up, Sir Christopher.

Patients are suffering. We want assurances from the Minister about future hospital closures, sustainable funding and the role of technology in the modern NHS. We want to know the direction of travel of the NHS in north-west London and the country as a whole.

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this important debate, and all hon. Members for speaking so passionately. I welcome the campaigners, who have been following our deliberations this afternoon. Everybody has spoken passionately about NHS services in north-west London, and the hon. Gentleman spoke about his area of Hammersmith and Fulham. I am under considerable time pressure, and if I do not answer all the questions that hon. Members raised, which ranged over primary and acute care, I am happy to write to them later.

I would like to start by thanking everybody who works in the NHS—in primary, secondary and community care—for everything they do, particularly in north-west London, which is a busy area with a lot of demand on services. It is exposed to unique pressures, but there are also unique opportunities. It has some of the country's busiest services and is used by an increasing, complex and dynamic population. Our capital city challenges our NHS, but it is also home to transformation and innovation that has delivered important benefits for patients.

“Shaping a healthier future” looked at the pressures on the NHS in and around the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It achieved significant benefits for patients in north-west London. It delivered 24/7 urgent care centres in every local borough and improvements in maternity and emergency paediatric care, and introduced a range of initiatives to help people obtain the specialist care they need closer to home. The NHS in north-west London is now in agreement to move on from the “Shaping a healthier future” programme. The hon. Gentleman asked specifically what the future will hold. In January, the Government announced that there will be an extra £20 billion a year for the NHS by 2024. As part of that, every area in the country will need to develop its own local plan for the next five years for how to spend the extra money. The north-west London sustainability and transformation partnership, working with clinicians and the public, will develop a new long-term, five-year plan for how best to spend that money, working together as a single health system.

I want quickly to address the points that the hon. Gentleman made about the lack of honesty in the north-west London process. Reconfiguration processes are, by their very nature, contentious, and raise many passions locally and nationally. His passion was evident from his contribution. The consultation process in north-west London involved extensive public consultation and clinical engagement throughout. It is important to recognise the high level of clinical engagement. It was never a political exercise or a fait accompli. Its underpinning principle was what was best for patients with the available resources. We need to support NHS staff and managers as they face the challenges before us. We must help them to manage service change responsibly. General practice primary care is the front door to and the cornerstone of the NHS, which is why the long-term plan addressed it when it was published in January.

I want to speak about Babylon GP at Hand. The hon. Gentleman raised a number of issues, and I will do my best to answer them. He spoke about the cost to the CCG. I wrote to one of his council colleagues this morning about the issues he raised. I understand that the CCG has reported that it overspent by £10 million in 2018-19, specifically in relation to GP at Hand. NHS England will of course have to look at the year's final accounts and any overspend in more detail to understand better the precise financial impact of changes in the borough. For 2019-20, the CCG's target allocation has increased, all else being equal, in line with the growth in its overall registered population up to the 12-month average for November 2017 to October 2018. NHS England does not believe that the CCG has had to scale back services because of any extra financial burden from GP at Hand, but we will continue to work with the CCG and other partners to explore options for maintaining the robustness of the commissioning system, both now, while GP at Hand is focused in London, and in the future.

I just want to address the hon. Gentleman's point about safety.

Andy Slaughter: I suspect the Minister was referring to my colleague, Councillor Ben Coleman, the cabinet member for health and adult social care, who wrote to the Secretary of State on 15 April specifically asking for the money spent—£10 million—to be refunded, and for a commitment to reimburse the CCG fully for the cost of GP at Hand. I did not hear the Minister say that, so will she give that assurance?

Seema Kennedy: I cannot give that reassurance, and I would only reiterate what I have just said to the hon. Gentleman.

On the safety of the app, all NHS providers are held to account through a robust network of systems, including, and not limited to, the inspections of the Care Quality Commission. Any apps providing video consultations must be evaluated and regulated to ensure that the patients who access those services can be confident that they receive safe, effective and high-quality care. Hammersmith and Fulham CCG, along with NHS England, has commissioned an independent evaluation of GP at Hand, which will report shortly.

I question what the shadow Minister said. Digital technology is part of the solution, but the Department is looking at other ways of transforming primary care.

[Seema Kennedy]

We are looking at how we look at partnership models and at how we pivot to primary in future. All patients will have a right to digital-first primary care, including web and video consultations, from April '21. All patients will be able to have digital access to their full records from 2020. They can, from this month, order repeat prescriptions electronically as the default.

By the end of the next decade, digital innovations are likely to have transformed the NHS. They will allow clinicians to work more efficiently and flexibly so they have more time to spend caring for patients. Every pound spent will go further. That will allow for greater responsiveness and personalisation for patients. We need to design services for patients and things that are available for people when they want them and at times that are convenient for them. I am pleased that the Government have committed to saying that all patients will have access to digital-first primary care from April 2021.

I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the effect of GP at Hand on primary care as a whole in his constituency. The challenge for the Government and NHS England is to ensure that the way we commission, contract and pay for care keeps up with the opportunities digital innovation offers, ensuring that the new technology is safely integrated into existing pathways without unduly destabilising the services it works alongside. Two important principles within the NHS are that a patient can choose which practice they register with, and that funding follows the patient. The emergence of digital-first providers, which register patients who may live some distance from the practice, raises the question of whether these funding arrangements are fair. This year, NHS England is analysing and reviewing the out-of-area registration.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 24 April 2019

TREASURY

Bilateral Loan for Ireland

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I would like to update Parliament on the loan to Ireland.

In December 2010, the UK agreed to provide a bilateral loan of £3.2 billion as part of a €67.5 billion international assistance package for Ireland. The loan was disbursed in eight tranches. The final tranche was drawn down on 26 September 2013. Ireland has made interest payments on the loan every six months since the first disbursement.

On 15 April, in line with the agreed repayment schedule, HM Treasury received a total payment of £407,843,097.02 from Ireland. This comprises the repayment of £403,370,000 in principal and £4,473,097.02 in accrued interest.

As required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010, HM Treasury laid a statutory report to Parliament on 1 April covering the period from 1 October to 31 March 2019. The report set out details of future payments up to the final repayment on 26 March 2021. The Government continue to expect the loan to be repaid in full and on time.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/791132/Ireland_loan_statutory_report_April_2019_web.pdf

The next statutory report will cover the period from 1 April to 30 September 2019. HM Treasury will report fully on all repayments received during this period in the report.

[HCWS1519]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Pornography: Age Verification

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): On 17 April 2019, my Department announced that age-verification for online pornography will begin on 15 July 2019. This means that commercial providers of online pornography will be required by law to carry out robust age-verification checks on users, to ensure that they are aged 18 or over.

The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) will be responsible for ensuring compliance with this new regulation. Websites that fail to implement age-verification technology face having payment services withdrawn or may be blocked for UK users.

Adult content is currently far too easy for children to access online. The introduction of mandatory age verification is a world-first, and we have taken the time to balance privacy concerns with the need to protect children from inappropriate content. We want the UK to be the safest place in the world to be online, and these new laws will help us achieve this.

We have also listened carefully to privacy concerns and take the issue of data privacy and security extremely seriously. We are clear that age-verification arrangements should only be concerned with verifying age, not identity.

In addition to the requirement for all age-verification providers to comply with General Data Protection Regulation standards, the BBFC has created a voluntary certification scheme, the Age-verification Certificate (AVC), which will assess the data security standards of age-verification providers. We feel that consumers should be able to choose age-verification solutions that meet an even higher privacy standard than is offered by GDPR if they wish to.

The AVC has been developed in co-operation with industry and Government. Certified age-verification solutions which offer these robust data protection conditions will be certified following an independent assessment and will carry the BBFC's new green 'AV' symbol. Details will also be published on the BBFC's age-verification website, ageverificationregulator.com, so consumers can make an informed choice between age-verification providers.

[HCWS1521]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Contingent Liability: Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 and outside the normal course of business, for the Minister concerned to lay a departmental Minute before Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances. The Department should refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement.

This Minute relates to the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), an Executive agency of DEFRA, entering into a commercial arrangement with the Kuwait environment public authority (an authority of the Government of Kuwait) who have asked CEFAS to contract with them to provide a marine environment monitoring information system for Kuwait. This is proposed to be a four-year contract of marine science services for which the Kuwaitis will cover all CEFAS's costs of around £40 million.

The Kuwait Government wish to enhance their national environmental management capability to world leading standards and are pursuing a strategy of working with the best international government bodies from strategic partner countries. This Kuwaiti Government objective is being delivered under their Environment Monitoring Information System Kuwait (eMISK) programme which spans marine, waste, terrestrial, air and subsurface environments. The Kuwait environment public authority have asked CEFAS to tender for the marine programme and this is supported by both countries at ministerial level, as set out in the inter-government declarations of the joint steering group.

The benefits of this work to both Governments are the significant contributions it will make to the long-term health of the Gulf marine environment. It will also engage the next generation of Kuwaiti scientists in bilateral co-operation with the UK, maintain and develop CEFAS's international capability, and position both Kuwait and the UK in a leading position in this area of science.

The contractual arrangements between the two parties follow standard Kuwaiti national commercial terms and conditions and include two contingent liabilities relating to a performance bond and liquidated damages claims. These liabilities are limited to a maximum of 20% of the £40 million contract value. Professional indemnity insurance will be purchased, using contract funds, to protect the Department against these risks leaving a residual excess value of no more than £250,000. Only uninsurable risks remain which would be due to late delivery or third-party claims.

CEFAS and DEFRA have considered the risks of this indemnity and they believe the likelihood of such indemnities being called upon is very low. Agency or departmental budgets are expected to fund any liability call. If such budgets are insufficient then any payment would be sought through the normal supply procedure.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle.

If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days, beginning on the date on which this Minute was laid before Parliament, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS1517]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Temporary Transitional Migration Arrangements: UK and Switzerland

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The UK and Switzerland have reached an agreement on temporary transitional migration arrangements for workers in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. These would apply until December 2020.

This agreement is further to the Swiss Government's announcement in February 2019 that in a no-deal scenario they would create a specific quota of 3,500 work permits for 2019 for UK workers. As part of the transitional migration agreement, Switzerland has also agreed that UK nationals would not need to meet rules regarding skill level, national preference and economic interest which normally apply to third country nationals during the period covered by the agreement. The agreement also includes protections for frontier workers not covered by the UK-Swiss citizens' rights agreement which would allow them to continue cross-border work until 31 December 2020.

The UK has agreed to provide arrangements for Swiss nationals who wish to work in the UK which are at least as favourable as those offered to UK nationals in Switzerland. In the event of no deal, and following the ending of free movement, Swiss and EEA nationals arriving in the UK for the first time would be eligible for European temporary leave to remain. This would allow them to work in the UK for three years.

This agreement will be subject to ratification processes in both states, and will be signed and published in due course. The UK and Switzerland will continue to work

closely together on implementing the agreement and will discuss the arrangements which will apply from the end of 2020 in due course.

Further information about the agreement can be found on gov.uk.

[HCWS1520]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU's European Travel Information Authorisation System

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government have decided to opt in to the aspect of the draft regulation that establishes the conditions for the access of the European travel information authorisation system (ETIAS) to the European criminal records information system (ECRIS-TCN), and has decided not to opt out of the aspect of the draft regulation that establishes the conditions for the access of ETIAS to the second Schengen information system (SIS II).

ETIAS is the EU's travel authorisation system that visa-exempt visitors (third country nationals and stateless persons) will have to apply to prior to their entry in the Schengen area. The UK does not participate in ETIAS as it forms part of Schengen border legislation that the UK cannot participate in, but the UK fully supports the EU's efforts to strengthen its external borders of which this forms part.

Under this proposal, an ETIAS central unit will access EU information technology systems to support their considerations, specifically ECRIS-TCN and SIS II. Once implemented, the regulation will allow the EU to revoke a grant of admission to a third country national if a relevant alert is identified from data the UK has uploaded to the ECRIS-TCN or SIS II databases. The European Commission has been working towards 2021 as the date from which ETIAS would become operational, but the date might be extended to 2023.

Whilst there are advantages to the EU from ETIAS having access to UK's data, there are no obvious operational or public protection benefits for the UK given it involves the provision of data to a scheme that the UK does not participate in. However, a significant argument in favour of participating is to prevent the UK's non-participation from giving rise to issues around UK access to SIS II or ECRIS-TCN in future.

Until the UK leaves the EU we remain a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK's opt-in to EU legislation on a case by case basis, with a view to maximising the UK's efforts to collaborate with the EU on a security partnership once the UK leaves the EU, including on SIS II and ECRIS-TCN.

[HCWS1518]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Period Poverty: Government Response

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): I wish to update the House on the activity that is taking place to end period poverty and ensure that every woman and girl in our society can access the menstrual products they need.

This is a complex issue and its causes are not restricted to poverty. Charities and businesses are leading impressive initiatives around the country to change old-fashioned, uninformed attitudes to menstruation and break down taboos. Many organisations and businesses are exhibiting a will to act to tackle this issue by promoting awareness and making products available to their staff and visitors. We have been consulting with these organisations and are also writing to all Members of this House to ask for their help in identifying good practice and further partners around the UK.

On 4 March this year I announced that the Government would establish a new joint taskforce on period poverty in the UK. This initiative recognises the importance of tackling period poverty for the dignity and empowerment of women and girls. Up to £250,000 has been committed in seed funding to support the work.

The taskforce will launch in June and will bring together a range of different organisations working on period poverty from across the public, private and third sectors. Details on the remit and membership of the taskforce will be announced in due course. Its objective will be to join up learning and ideas and develop a comprehensive, sustainable response. By linking different sectors, it will build on the range of diverse initiatives that already exist, promoting those which are delivering impact, and helping them to grow and become sustainable.

We need much better evidence and understanding of how period poverty affects different groups in our society. Therefore, improving the data in this area will be an issue the taskforce will tackle as a priority. Addressing stigma will be another main area of focus, given the shame and taboo that still exists around periods. The taskforce will consider the role of education, communications and role models in shifting social attitudes. The Government's new relationships, sex and health education, published earlier this year, will ensure every pupil learns about leading healthy lives, including menstrual wellbeing, as part of a well-rounded education on mental and physical health.

By bringing together different parts of Government, the taskforce will promote a coherent, sustainable approach. In the spring statement of 13 March 2019, the Government announced that they will support a new scheme to provide free sanitary products in secondary schools and

further education colleges. On 16 April, it was further announced that free period products will be offered to girls in all primary schools in England from early next year.

Extending the programme to all primary schools follows feedback from teachers, students and parents. The Department for Education is now working with key stakeholders in the public and private sector to roll out the programme in a cost-effective manner that supports girls and young women across the country.

In March 2019 the NHS in England announced that it will offer free period products to every hospital patient who needs them and today the Home Office has announced that it is set to change the law to ensure that all menstruating women, and others with personal health and hygiene needs, are treated with dignity whilst in custody. Police forces will provide menstrual products to female detainees if required, free of charge. The intended changes will be brought into effect when the revised Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) codes of practice have been laid in Parliament.

In recognition of the global nature of the issue, the Department for International Development is leading a new global campaign of action to end period poverty by 2030. Across low and middle-income countries it is estimated that over half of all women and girls are forced to use homemade products, rags, grass or paper to manage their periods. In many countries there is a lack of information and appropriate water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. I announced on International Women's Day that this campaign will kick-start with an allocation of up to £2 million for small and medium charities working on period poverty in DFID priority countries. We are building on existing UK aid programmes that are enabling women and girls around the world to access sanitary products, facilities and knowledge about their periods, including through the Girls' Education Challenge, Amplify Change and DFID's water and sanitation, reproductive health and research programmes.

I would like to pay tribute to all those working so tirelessly to tackle period poverty and shame both in the UK and around the world. We look forward to helping their good work scale and reach every woman and girl in need.

[HCWS1522]

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