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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 25 April 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Free Trade Agreements: NHS/Public Services

1. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps he has taken to ensure that the NHS and other public services are excluded from future trade agreements. [910509]

7. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): If he will ensure that future free trade agreements do not (a) lower standards in and (b) lead to the privatisation of the NHS. [910516]

9. **Mr Philip Dunne** (Ludlow) (Con): If he will ensure that future free trade agreements do not (a) lower standards in and (b) lead to the privatisation of the NHS. [910518]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): As we leave the European Union, the Government will ensure that all future trade agreements continue to protect the UK's right to regulate public services, including the NHS. I have been clear on a number of occasions that more trade should not come at the expense of the high levels of quality and protection enjoyed in the UK.

Diana Johnson: I am pleased that the Secretary of State has made those comments, and I am sure we can all agree that, whatever happens with Brexit, our country must not be held to ransom by multinational corporate interests over the future of the NHS and other public services, so can the Secretary of State give a watertight guarantee that we will not see any trade deals that would drive up the costs of medicines and allow foreign firms to sue the UK over improvements in public health and standards in healthcare generally?

Dr Fox: As I have made clear in questions and in debate in this House, if we look at trade agreements that we have already entered into—for example, in chapter 9 of the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement, the cross-border trade and services chapter, article 9.2 makes it very clear we see that the Government retain the right to regulate in public services. Any changes in the NHS should be a matter for domestic policy debate in the United Kingdom, and not anywhere else.

Mark Menzies: The UK is a world leader in healthcare provision, founded on the core values of the NHS. What steps is the Department taking to promote British expertise in this sector and sell those skills abroad?

Dr Fox: There is not only enormous interest but enormous demand for UK expertise in healthcare, and we are committed to sharing that expertise and knowledge with the rest of the world. Research commissioned by Healthcare UK recently identified £3 billion to £7 billion of potential contracts for UK health organisations annually over the next 10 years. That is a lot of jobs.

Mr Speaker: Mr Philip Dunne—not here. Where is the fella? I hope he is not indisposed. We will have to proceed.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Free trade agreements are, of course, needed, and the EU has some very good ones, which is why the United Kingdom Government are copying them. But trading on World Trade Organisation terms is very expensive. What is the Secretary of State doing to dispel the notion that is abroad, particularly in his own party, that leaving the EU and trading on WTO terms is a good idea? If it was, every country would be walking out of their trade blocs and every country would be ripping up trade agreements. It is a very silly and very dangerous idea, and I hope he is doing his best to combat it.

Dr Fox: I am not quite sure how that relates to the question on healthcare, but it is an important point that the WTO rules provide a baseline, and the way in which countries get preferential treatment beyond that baseline is very often through a free trade agreement. That is why we want to see free trade agreements beyond what we have today.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I welcome the assurances that the Secretary of State has given to the House here today, but can he confirm that the principal protections for public services related to the comprehensive economic and trade agreement are in fact to be found in the joint interpretative instrument, which does not have the same legal force as the treaty? Crucially, it cannot alter or override it. If we are to have confidence in the protections for our public services and the NHS in future trade agreements, these must be written into the text of the treaties. Does he agree?

Dr Fox: However we get the assurances, that is what we need to do. In CETA, for example, they are contained in chapters 9 and 28, as well as annexe 2 and the additional national reservation in annexe 2. It is up to this House how we carry out public policy. For example, in the four years from 2006, Labour outsourced 0.5% of the NHS budget to the private sector each year, which of course fell to only half that level under the coalition Government. If Labour wants to increase to its previous levels of outsourcing, it should be able to do so under a policy protection given under the treaties.

Service Businesses: Overseas Markets

2. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to enable service businesses to access overseas markets; and if he will make a statement. [910510]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery):

The Government support UK services businesses to access foreign markets in a number of ways, including through trade promotion and facilitation. For example, in March 2019, the DIT took a delegation of eight leading UK FinTech companies to exhibit at Money 20/20 in Singapore. The DIT also works with partners overseas to remove access barriers, opening up new opportunities for UK businesses.

Michael Fabricant: My hon. Friend will know that in this rather complex world environment, there is a confusion at times under WTO rules between goods and services. Once we leave the EU, get a clean break and regain our place at the WTO table, will he make it a priority to make clearer definitions of what are goods and what are services?

George Hollingbery: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right; there are a great many complexities at the WTO. In fact, the world is sliding inexorably towards a future of increased protectionism without changes being agreed at the WTO to address all problems and to cope with new forms of trade that simply did not exist even 10 years ago and that create the confusion he identifies. As a newly independent voice, the UK will be a champion for change, openness and co-operation, because believe me, Mr Speaker, a failure to deal with the problems the WTO faces is not an outcome that anybody should want to contemplate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: In congratulating the hon. Member for Huddersfield upon the magnificence of his tie, I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can all those on the Government Front Bench tell me what I should say to my service and manufacturing industries that export overseas? For years, they have been frustrated that the Chinese are stealing their patents and intellectual property, but now this Government are going to open not only the back door but the front door to the Chinese to take their secrets and undercut them.

George Hollingbery: In the past week, the Chinese have agreed a joint communiqué with the EU about the forced transfer of intellectual property, which gives us some comfort. We work extensively with the Chinese Government through joint trade reviews to examine various areas of the economy, particularly in services, where we can address this. I believe that progress is being made on this front, but I go back to the point I made to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant): this is a complex area. WTO rules make this very difficult to address, and we need to change it.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Three quarters of our economy is in services, yet over 90% of service firms export nothing. What more can be done to change this underlying culture and systemic issue, so that the majority of service firms export?

George Hollingbery: As I mentioned in answer to the previous question, we are conducting a number of joint trade reviews with India, China and Brazil—some of

the largest economies in the world—to ensure that we address some of these access barriers; to ensure that, for example, Chinese-language contracts are translated into an official English version; to ensure that service providers understand what the rules and regulations are; and to ensure that qualifications are matched across the piece. There is a great deal we can do and more that we will do.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I welcome what the Minister said about trying to open up overseas access to UK service companies. However, is it not hugely disappointing that the continuity agreements with Norway and Switzerland exclude trade in services? Is it not the case that if, post Brexit, we revert to WTO rules trade with the EU, we would see a massive 26% fall in global service trade, with just as bad a fall in the UK's service trade even if we get that free trade agreement?

George Hollingbery: As we approach the negotiations with the EU on the future economic partnership, services will play a large part in that. We have signed mutual recognition agreements with Australia and New Zealand, and as for the Norway and Switzerland deals, we should never forget that 35% of pretty much all the goods contracts entered into by the UK is contained within services value. This is not just a matter of pure services, but of goods as well.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Service exporters depend on an international workforce, but arbitrary immigration targets limit their ability to recruit the staff they need. Growing our market share in services is essential to the future success of our economy, so if this Government truly have a global strategy, why are businesses that want to export being denied access to a global pool of talent?

George Hollingbery: On the whole, the services businesses that are exporting are doing so by establishing overseas, and therefore recruitment in the UK does not particularly concern them, as they are employing people in foreign countries. That said, we know there is an issue with provision of skilled labour in the UK. The immigration Bill, when it comes forward, will provide reassurance on the ability to recruit people with certain skill levels, and I look forward to seeing that.

Free Trade Agreements: Regions and Devolved Administrations

3. **Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that the (a) regions and (b) devolved Administrations of the UK contribute to the formulation of new free trade agreements. [910511]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): We are committed to ensuring a meaningful role for the regions and devolved Administrations in the development of our trade policy. The DIT has been consulting widely on its approach to potential FTAs with regional representatives from local government and local enterprise partnerships. I can further confirm that we are putting in place a new ministerial forum with the devolved Administrations to cover international trade, as well as continuing to discuss wider future working arrangements on trade policy.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for that answer. Businesses in Redditch such as Mettis Aerospace, Bee Lighting and Thorlux Lighting are at the heart of global manufacturing and are leading-edge businesses. Will the Minister confirm that he is working closely with representatives of west midlands manufacturing industry to ensure that their interests are represented and our local economy can benefit from future trade agreements?

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): And with the Mayor.

Rachel Maclean: Indeed.

George Hollingbery: As my hon. Friend will know, my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) is very keen on our keeping up contact with the Mayor of the West Midlands combined authority. We of course do so, and create contacts with businesses that way. The strategic trade advisory group, which will be helping us with FTAs, includes representation from regional business. We will always be there to consult with local business, and I urge my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) to contact the local DIT business office in Birmingham in relation to any businesses in Redditch that need its help.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the devolved Administrations must be fully involved in developing both the negotiation mandate and the negotiations themselves when the international trade negotiations have an impact on devolved competencies?

George Hollingbery: I have visited the devolved Administrations several times and I talk with the Ministers on a regular basis. I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that the devolved Administrations have a key part to play as we go forward and negotiate our free trade agreements. We are currently in negotiation with the DAs on putting together what is known as a concordat on how they will be implemented. The progress on that, to be quite frank with the House, has been disappointingly slow. From our end, we have not reached an agreed policy position, but we will do so shortly, and I am keen that the devolved Administrations are properly involved.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): If all these trade agreements are going to be so glorious, irresistible and beneficial to the economy, why not simply give the devolved Administrations the power to express their consent through legislation for each of them?

George Hollingbery: The matter of trade policy is a reserved power.

EU Customs Union

4. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for the responsibilities of his Department of including UK membership of the EU customs union in the EU-UK political declaration. [910512]

8. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for his policies of the UK's continuing membership of the EU customs union. [910517]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The Government's intention, as provided for in the political declaration, is to secure a tariff-free trading relationship with our European partners, alongside an ambitious independent trade policy with the rest of the world. A customs union would prevent the UK from varying its tariffs and could leave the UK subject, without representation, to the policy of an entity over which MPs had no democratic control.

Mr Hollobone: If we were to be part of the EU customs union after Brexit, the United Kingdom, as the world's fifth biggest economy, could kiss goodbye to any realistic chance of an independent trade policy. For this very good reason, being a member of the customs union was ruled out in the last Conservative party manifesto. Were this to become Government policy, would not the Secretary of State and his entire ministerial team be honour bound to resign?

Dr Fox: It is very clear that we do not want to see a customs union being put in place for one of the reasons that my hon. Friend has already given, which is that, with us as a third country, the EU would be able to negotiate access to the UK market—the world's fifth biggest market—without any due consideration of the impact on the United Kingdom. We would find ourselves in a totally new trading position in that access to our market would be traded for us.

Martin Vickers: One of the principal benefits of Brexit is of course the ability to set our own trade policies, and many businesses in my constituency—it includes Immingham, the largest port in the country—want to take advantage of the freedoms that will be forthcoming. What additional support will the Secretary of State's Department offer those businesses?

Dr Fox: I know that my hon. Friend has taken a very close interest in free ports. We are close to finalising a report on their potential benefits, and he will be one of the first with whom I will share that information.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Some 9,000 people work in the Welsh steel industry, so can I ask the Secretary of State to think again, and support a permanent customs union and commit to a common external tariff on steel imports to support steel jobs in south Wales?

Dr Fox: No, I will not commit to that. I have set out the reasons why I believe the application of a common external tariff will be limiting on the UK's ability to carry out an independent trade policy. What I would say is that we already have the Trade Remedies Authority up and running, and that is the best way to deal with any disputes over steel through WTO rules.¹

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State accept that even outside the European Union, some other countries will seek to restrict their trade? For instance, has not the United States said about its negotiating objectives that it will seek to restrict the trading ability of any country that seeks to trade with China?

1. [Official Report, 30 April 2019, Vol. 659, c. 2MC.]

Dr Fox: The United States is perfectly entitled to set out trade objectives, as are we. We believe that trade is best operated through the rules-based international system based on the WTO. Countries can have their own opinions, but that is still the safest, best and most predictable way to carry out global trade.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): We know the benefit of a permanent customs union, particularly for the integrated supply chains on which so much of our manufacturing success is based. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the net economic benefit of an independent trade policy in the short, medium and long term?

Dr Fox: We believe it is possible to get the benefits of a customs union—no tariffs, no quotas and no rules of origin checks—through the mechanism set out in the Government's proposal on our future relationship with the European Union. The ability to access growing markets will depend on our ability to create trade agreements with those markets. A report by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development suggested that by 2030 the Asian proportion of trade will be above 50% for the first time since the 19th century, and we must be in a position to take advantage of that.

Intellectual Property Rights

5. **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government are taking to protect intellectual property rights in international trade agreements. [910514]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The UK's intellectual property regime is consistently rated as one of the best in the world. The Government are reviewing their future trade policy as we leave the EU and ensuring that existing trade arrangements with global partners—including provisions on intellectual property—continue uninterrupted on the day the UK leaves the EU.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister will no doubt be aware that tomorrow is World Intellectual Property Day, and this year the theme is sport and intellectual property. A number of United Kingdom-based companies have had their intellectual property stolen by beoutQ, a Saudi Arabian-based pirate broadcaster, including—I know this will interest you, Mr Speaker—last Monday's Watford against Arsenal match. What steps are we taking to protect the intellectual property rights of UK businesses and sports interests, and will we use our trade policy to hold to account countries such as Saudi Arabia that are allowing the theft of our country's intellectual property in that way?

George Hollingbery: I am not familiar with the case raised by the right hon. Gentleman, but if would like to drop me a line, I would be happy to look into it more carefully. We will continue to make representations to Saudi Arabia on that point. The UK intellectual property regime is respected around the world, and our local, European and international commitments produce one of the tightest and most respected regulatory regimes for IP worldwide. We believe that is the right system, and we will insist that it is honoured by others, particularly if we are to do trade deals with them.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Minister is right to encourage small and medium-sized businesses to do more trade internationally, but those businesses are the most vulnerable to the risk of intellectual property theft. What assurances and support can the Minister give companies such as those in the digital games sector in my constituency, to encourage them to do more abroad?

George Hollingbery: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a moment ago. We have one of the most robust and respected regimes for IP protection internationally. A specialist group sits in the Department for International Trade and advises on IP matters, and that is very important to this country. We recognise the extent of exports that are driven by games, TV, sports and so on, and that is hugely important to us. SMEs should get in contact with local DIT offices. We can always help and would be delighted to do so.

GREAT Campaign

6. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What his priorities are for the GREAT campaign in 2019-20. [910515]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): GREAT is the Government's most ambitious ever international marketing campaign. *[Interruption.]* It encourages the world to visit, study and do business in the UK. While Labour Members never lose an opportunity to talk this country down—as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has just done there—we use GREAT to sell Britain abroad. If the chuntering from the potential future Speaker could stop for one second, I will say that GREAT works across 144 countries, and for trade and investment in 2019-20, its priorities are the USA, Germany, China, Japan, Australia, India, Canada, France, Italy and Spain.

Vicky Ford: Britain's universities are among our greatest organisations. Some are household names across the world, but some, like Anglia Ruskin University, which is based in Chelmsford as well as Cambridge, are less well known. How is the GREAT campaign supporting our education sector?

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I was at the all-party university group yesterday, meeting vice-chancellors and others, to discuss this issue. Just last month, we launched our new international education strategy. As part of that, we are encouraging bids to the GREAT challenge fund to showcase to even more countries the fantastic education offer this country has.

Topical Questions

T1. [910524] **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): My Department is responsible for foreign and outward direct investment, establishing an independent trade policy and export promotion. I can announce to the

House that UK Export Finance will support an Airbus Defence and Space UK contract worth nearly \$500 million to manufacture and deliver two satellites and a ground station for Türksat, Turkey's communications satellite operator.

May I also, with your indulgence Mr Speaker, thank two civil servants who are leaving my Department? My principal private secretary, Oliver Christian, has been an outstanding civil servant and I congratulate him on his promotion. I also thank Amy Tinley, my outgoing special adviser, who has been a force of nature in my Department and will be widely missed across the whole of the civil service.

Gavin Newlands: I congratulate the civil servants on getting out of Dodge while they can.

Scottish Enterprise told the Scottish Affairs Committee that the success of Scotland's financial industry was based on accessing and servicing all customers in the EU, which it does currently under the free trade non-tariff EU passport system. Does that not highlight once again the vital importance of freedom of movement to Scotland, and that the Secretary of State's Government simply do not care about Scottish interests or Scotland's vote to remain?

Dr Fox: I will ignore the hon. Gentleman's lack of grace in his first comment.

What that shows is the importance to Scotland of services and of access to the single market in the United Kingdom. Financial services are one of the country's greatest and strongest exports, and Scotland benefits hugely from being part of the United Kingdom's infrastructure.

T2. [910525] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): I congratulate the Government on the GREAT campaign but, in this week of St George's Day, as we celebrate all things English, will the Secretary of State confirm that we are going to promote not only everything British but the component parts of the United Kingdom, including England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and indeed our cherished Crown dependencies and overseas territories?

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend, in his usual way, makes an excellent point. It is not just the fact that we have those very important constituent parts of the United Kingdom to celebrate—we also celebrate our commonality and our unity as expressed through the Union.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The world was shocked by the two crashes of Boeing 737 Max 8s that saw the tragic loss of 346 lives. That is, of course, a matter for the European Aviation Safety Agency to investigate, but it is for the Secretary of State to investigate whether the export capacity of Airbus was unfairly affected by Boeing's failure to be transparent about the pitch instability of the aircraft, or to provide specific safety training on the MCAS system, which was supposed to counter that instability. He will know that in one 12-month period the concealment of those issues helped Boeing to increase its sales against the Airbus A320neo aircraft by 768 planes, while Airbus sales dropped by 748 in the same period. What support, if any, does his Department currently provide to Boeing? Does he consider that its ethical failure has had an adverse impact on Airbus's sales? What discussions has he had about

Boeing with the Directorate-General for Competition and the Directorate-General for Trade in the European Union to protect Airbus's export capacity from unfair and potentially illegal practices by its competitors?

Dr Fox: Let me associate myself immediately with the hon. Gentleman's sentiments about the loss of lives as a result of the tragic crashes of the 737 Max aircraft. Safety issues are, of course, the responsibility of the Department for Transport but, in the context of international competition, as he is well aware, there have been two recent cases at the World Trade Organisation relating to Washington's state subsidies for Boeing and European subsidies for Airbus. As far as I am concerned, the issues relating to Airbus have been solved. I think that we would all benefit from a clear set of international rules on aircraft subsidy so that we could be assured that there is a genuine international level playing field, not least because of the rise of the Chinese aircraft industry and its entry into the market.

T6. [910530] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): This afternoon the Confederation of Indian Industry will host a major conference to allow the regions of the United Kingdom to pitch to the states of India for future international trade. What action is my hon. Friend taking to encourage the regions to pitch for business in India?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): According to an EY report, foreign direct investment has tended to move out of London into other parts of the United Kingdom, and there has been an increase in manufacturing activity. We are seeking to expand exports from all parts of the country, not least to India, and I am delighted to say that exports to India were up by nearly 20% in 2018. Only last night I attended the Grant Thornton tracker event with Mr Banerjee, the director general of the Confederation of Indian Industry, who is a great friend to this country and to our businesses up and down the land.

T3. [910527] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Because of the shambles over Brexit, UK manufacturing currently has the highest-ever level of stockpiling in the G7. The latest survey conducted by the North East chamber of commerce shows low levels of cash and, as a consequence, a sharp downturn in export activity. Cash is king: it is the lifeblood of business. Will the Secretary of State speak to his colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury and, as a matter of urgency, provide financial support for UK manufacturers to deal with this Brexit chaos?

Dr Fox: The entire premise of that question is wrong. There has not been a depression in export activity. In fact, in the first quarter of this year, exports rose by 3.1%, which was an acceleration of the trend in the fourth quarter of 2018.

T7. [910531] **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Britain is also great at green tech, and a leader in areas such as offshore wind technology. What opportunities are being exploited for us to export our expertise in clean technology to other parts of the world?

Dr Fox: It is important that we take climate issues seriously. Whether or not individuals accept the current scientific consensus on the causes of climate change, it is sensible for everyone to use finite resources in a responsible way. The United Kingdom was the first country to establish legally binding emission targets, through the Climate Change Act 2008, and we have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 country. We are leaders in clean energy production, and it is estimated that \$11.5 trillion is likely to be invested globally in clean energy between now and 2050. That represents an enormous opportunity and the potential for more jobs in the United Kingdom, which, as I have said, is already a global leader in terms of both practice and exports.

T4. [910528] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): May I ask the Secretary of State to welcome Anzac day, and our long-standing friendship with Australia and New Zealand? May I also ask whether he recognises what every major economy understands—that in order to export, firms need a strong domestic market, including public sector contracts? Rather than believing that we are the only ones in step and lecturing other countries about changing their ways, should we not face reality? Will the Secretary of State urge his Cabinet colleagues to put British firms and British workers first and, in public sector contracts, to put Britain first?

Dr Fox: There is also the small matter of putting British taxpayers first, and ensuring that they are getting value for money from any contracts that we award. However, I entirely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman said about Anzac day. In fact, may I take the opportunity to invite colleagues to join me and others at the wreath-laying ceremony that will take place at the Cenotaph at 10.30 this morning, and the service at Westminster Abbey that will follow it?

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments earlier on trade agreements and the NHS. As a former clinician, can he confirm categorically that future trade agreements will not impact adversely on the values, standards or funding model of the NHS?

Dr Fox: As I said, it is very important that NHS policy and management are decided by British political debate, not from outside. We have had considerable success in utilising the private sector to augment the NHS. As Andy Burnham said, the previous Labour Government worked with the private sector to bring down NHS waiting lists, and they came right down. I would hope that any future Labour Government would have exactly the same freedoms to use the same policies.

T5. [910529] **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): Donald Trump is an "America first" US President, so does that mean that in any future trade deals with the US we will be "Britain second", to our disadvantage?

Dr Fox: Obviously not.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Is there any opportunity to further promote UK steel exports through the GREAT campaign in the year ahead, not least because it is the best steel in the world?

Graham Stuart: We will take every opportunity to support UK steel exports, and of course exports in general, which is why we produced our export strategy last year. With the help of Members such as my hon. Friend, we will champion local businesses and ensure that that message goes right around the world.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Canadian model offers a useful example of how the devolved Administrations should be involved in trade policy formulation. Does the Secretary of State agree that a substantive role in the strategic trade advisory group is essential for the meaningful involvement of the Welsh Government in UK trade policy?

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The strategic trade advisory group is there to provide a broad societal view of what should be achieved in free trade agreements. We are of course talking in depth with the Welsh Government about their views on what we ought and ought not to be doing on trade policy, the industries we should be championing and how. I do not think that the strategic trade advisory group is the right place for that engagement, but there is of course a Welsh business represented on the group.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is vital for us to encourage low-income countries to participate fairly in world trade, and for that they need inward investment. Will the Minister kindly advise us on what the UK is doing to promote investment into low-income countries so that they can participate fairly and reasonably in world trade, with world-class goods and services?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for championing lower-income countries around the world. We have made outward direct investment a priority. We are working with the Department for International Development to help developing countries to attract FDI. The Prime Minister has tasked us with making the UK Africa's biggest G7 investor by 2022. Through our own investment promotion programme, DFID's Invest Africa programme, and the Africa investment summit, which I am organising with DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, we aim to drive mutual prosperity, in Africa and beyond.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Universal Credit: Joint Claimants

1. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential merits of splitting universal credit payments between partners in joint claimant households. [910532]

5. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential merits of splitting universal credit payments between partners in joint claimant households. [910536]

9. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the potential merits of splitting universal credit payments between partners in joint claimant households. [910540]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): We believe that most couples can and want to manage their finances jointly, without state intervention. However, we recognise that there are circumstances in which split payments are appropriate and we will always put that in place when requested.

Chris Law: We understand that the UK Government are carrying out a formal impact assessment of the options put forward by the Scottish Government on delivering split payments, but has the Minister made representations to the Department for Work and Pensions outlining how split payments could help to protect victims of domestic violence?

Guy Opperman: We are working closely with the Scottish Government to establish the practicalities and nuts and bolts of their proposed pilot. We recognise that domestic abuse, including economic abuse, is a horrific crime that can affect anybody, and we are working across parties and across Government to ensure that it is addressed.

Gavin Newlands: Does the Minister agree that the options put forward by the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Social Security and Older People are sensible and deliverable, with the DWP's assistance, and will he congratulate the Scottish Government on taking forward this fantastic work to make universal credit fairer?

Guy Opperman: That is not within my specific portfolio, so I cannot comment on the details, but I do know that policy officials in the Scottish Government and in DWP engage on an ongoing basis to determine how workable the Scottish Government's proposals on split payments are, and that work will continue.

Patrick Grady: If two people in the same household work for the same employer, they do not receive one wage; they each receive a separate salary at the end of every month. If the point of universal credit is to mimic wages to help people to get back into work, why on earth do the Government insist on not taking forward the idea of split payments for households?

Guy Opperman: This Government believe, as have every preceding Government, that most couples can and want to manage their finances jointly without state intervention, and it is not this Government's policy to make split payments by default. However, we are looking at the proposed Scottish pilot and, at the same time, by the end of the summer all jobcentres will have domestic abuse specialists to support work coaches and raise awareness.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Who is impacted more by the introduction of universal credit: women or men?

Guy Opperman: Women and men have benefited equally from the improvements that universal credit has brought in. There is unquestionable improvement in the outlook for women on a long-term basis as a result of the introduction of universal credit.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the decision to ensure that universal credit is paid to the main carer in the household, so that more women can make sure that their families are well supported?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has highlighted this and is bringing forward proposals to ensure that the main carer is the recipient. In particular, we are looking at the universal credit application form to ensure that the identification of the bank account can be done in an appropriate way.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am sure that the Minister is aware of the difficulties that Women's Aid and other domestic abuse charities have highlighted. Will he explain to the House how those difficulties will be addressed?

Guy Opperman: That is a very broad question, and I will ensure that the Minister writes to the hon. Gentleman specifically on the work that is being done with Women's Aid on an ongoing basis. There is a wholehearted strategy on domestic abuse and support for women in this context that is being addressed on a multitude of levels.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Minister has repeatedly said that split payments would be too difficult and that the Government would therefore be unwilling to consider that option at this time. However, the Scottish Government and the Social Security Minister have proved that it is possible to ensure that split payments are the default. Does he accept that, by not doing this, he is simply compounding financial insecurity and leaving women in potentially perilous situations?

Guy Opperman: Split payments are available on request. No information is needed to get a split payment. However, 60% of payments are already paid into a woman's bank account. As I outlined to my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), main carer recipient work is being done to ensure that this is done on a practical basis.

Women's Life Expectancy

2. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implications for Government policy of the most recent ONS statistics on women's life expectancy in the poorest areas of England. [910533]

13. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the implications for Government policy of the most recent ONS statistics on women's life expectancy in the poorest areas of England. [910546]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Preventing health problems is the best way to improve life expectancy. We are taking action on childhood obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease and action to reduce smoking rates. Later this year, my Department will produce a prevention Green Paper, which will set out cross-Government plans for prevention in greater detail.

Chi Onwurah: In Newcastle, cervical cancer screening rates are significantly lower in more deprived areas of the city, and the recent Macmillan cancer inequalities report showed that more deprived areas had worse access to cancer treatment. This is because people on lower incomes are more likely to be on zero-hour contracts and juggling childcare and other caring responsibilities with work, and therefore less able to access fixed-time appointments in places outside their local community. What is the Minister doing to ensure that the healthcare system reflects the lives of those in the poorest areas and to raise incomes so that we have fewer cancer and health inequalities?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We know that we need to make it easier to book appointments and more convenient for women to attend them. That is why Sir Mike Richards is undertaking a comprehensive review of screening programmes. It will look at how we can improve the uptake and set out clear recommendations on how we can make those screening programmes more accessible.

Diana Johnson: ONS figures published in March 2019 show that the life expectancy of women in the poorest UK regions fell by 98 days between 2012 and 2017. Given that this is the first time that that has happened in peacetime since the Victorian era, what conclusions does the Minister draw from the fact that it has happened only since 2010?

Stephen Hammond: The conclusion I draw is to look at Public Health England's recent review, which made it clear that it is not possible to attribute the slowdown in the improvement of life expectancy to any single cause. That is why we are not complacent, as I said in answer to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). The Budget saw us fully fund the situation with a big cash boost, and there will be a prevention Green Paper and we have a prevention vision. All that will contribute towards ensuring that life expectancy, which has not been as good as one would have liked, improves.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Smoking rates among pregnant women, particularly in poorer regions, remain stubbornly high, so what action is my hon. Friend taking to reduce smoking rates in order to make pregnancy and childbirth easier for young people?

Stephen Hammond: As I said in response to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), the Government have already put in place prevention programmes to ensure a reduction in smoking rates. The prevention vision and the prevention Green Paper will set out the means by which smoking can be reduced further to support people, pregnant or otherwise.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Life expectancy has fallen for the poorest women over the past nine years. What is the Minister's analysis of why that has happened?

Stephen Hammond: I answered that question just a moment ago. As I said, Public Health England's recent review made it clear that it is not possible to attribute the slowdown to any one cause. It is therefore important to tackle all the causes of the deterioration in life expectancy, which is why the Government will publish a prevention Green Paper later this year.

Domestic Abuse: Medical Training

3. **Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab):** What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on improving training for frontline medical staff to help identify domestic abuse. [910534]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Tackling domestic abuse is a key priority for this Government. That is why we have put £2 million into expanding the pilot programme, which will create a model health response for survivors of domestic violence and abuse. Training for frontline medical staff to help identify domestic abuse is included in a wide range of training and education curriculums for health staff.

Vicky Foxcroft: According to Women's Aid's "Survival and Beyond" report, 54% of women experiencing sexual and physical abuse meet the criteria for at least one common mental health disorder. I note what the Minister says about training, but what specific domestic abuse training is the Department considering to ensure that it actually happens?

Stephen Hammond: I commend the hon. Lady's work on the all-party parliamentary group on domestic violence and abuse. She will know that the Department produced a domestic abuse resource for health professionals that advises them on how best to support adults and young people over 16 who are experiencing domestic abuse, and that training is available now.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the publication of a definition of domestic abuse will help frontline staff to identify victims?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. The definition, which also includes factors such as mental health and economic issues, will make things much clearer for frontline staff and help them to understand and look for incidents of domestic violence and abuse.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The most recent survey of women's prisons shows that nearly 65% of prisoners have had a significant acquired brain injury, which often relates directly to their offending behaviour. The vast majority of the 65% have suffered domestic violence, so should we not be screening every woman as she arrives in prison to ensure that they get the neuro-rehabilitation support they need?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and he will know that the Government have committed extra money to ensure women prisoners get the support they need for neuro problems when they enter prison.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Domestic violence can be extremely damaging for the children who witness it. What is the Minister doing to support those children?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend raises an important point, because domestic violence clearly impacts the whole of family life, and there is evidence that children are also affected. We need to ensure that there are no legal barriers to sharing data to protect children or vulnerable adults, and we need to ensure that the £8 million we are spending will help those children recover from domestic violence.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Health-based independent domestic violence advisers can identify victims of domestic violence that other services are unable to detect. SafeLives, the national domestic abuse charity, suggests that domestic violence often goes undetected among elderly and black, Asian and minority ethnic victims. Surely, by placing these professionals in an A&E environment, countless victims could be identified and helped. Will the Minister commit to placing independent domestic violence advisers in all A&E departments?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We need to ensure that people are properly triaged for all sorts of diseases when they turn up at A&E, including domestic violence. I will reflect on her point and talk to NHS England about it.

Women Entrepreneurs

4. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking to help women entrepreneurs grow their businesses. [910535]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Since 2012, 62,949 start-up loans worth £489.5 million have been made to business owners, and 39% of those loans went to female entrepreneurs. In response to the Rose review, an industry-led taskforce will look at driving greater investment in female entrepreneurs by finance providers. The Government are also establishing a new investing in women code, through which financial institutions will take steps to improve the allocation of funding to female entrepreneurs.

Theresa Villiers: It is worrying that the Rose review concluded that only one in three active entrepreneurs is a woman, so will the Minister take action to respond to the recommendations of the Rose review so that more women can turn their great business ideas into great businesses?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my right hon. Friend for highlighting that particular finding. It is our ambition to increase the number of female entrepreneurs by half by 2030. The new investing in women code will drive more funding for women and encourage more women to start businesses. Alison Rose is already taking several recommendations forward with the backing of industry. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is bringing forward the Government's strategy to address persistent gender economic barriers facing women across the country at every level.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that an increasing number of women entrepreneurs are using digital blockchain tools to start and grow their businesses? Will she meet people who can introduce her to blockchain solutions, and will she say something to her colleagues in the Treasury and the Financial Conduct Authority to encourage such use?

Kelly Tolhurst: I would be very happy to meet women who are using all manner of tools. I met eBay yesterday, and it talked about the work it is doing to encourage women to start their own businesses. It particularly talked about how it is working with retail businesses in Wolverhampton. I am always available to speak about anything that will encourage women in business—in fact, not just women but all people.

Workplace Harassment

6. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of introducing a duty on employers to prevent workplace harassment. [910537]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The Government strongly condemn sexual harassment in the workplace and are committed to seeing it end. Employers are already responsible for preventing sexual harassment in their workplace and can be held legally liable if they do not, but we are consulting this summer to gather evidence on whether reinforcing this with a proactive duty would lead to better prevention of this terrible practice in the workplace.

Bill Esterson: Women who work in the retail and hospitality sectors in the UK have little protection when they face workplace harassment, which is something that happens far too often. As last year's Presidents Club scandal shows, employers have no duty to protect their staff. May I encourage the Minister, when she carries out that review, to give serious consideration to reinstating section 40 of the Equality Act 2010 to give women the protection at work they have every right to deserve?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this, because it is important; every woman—indeed, every person—should be able to enjoy their place of work without the threat or risk of sexual harassment. I take issue gently with him on section 40. He may know that it was used only twice when it was in force and it had the three strikes approach, which we believe was one reason why it was not used as often as it should have been. We are very open-minded; we have this consultation, and I encourage everyone to participate in it, so that we can find solutions that suit not just employees, but responsible employers.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Has the Minister thought about looking at the system of protected conversations that was introduced by the coalition Government? Given the nature of such conversations, that system could give a licence to employers to engage in harassment in conversations that then, under statute, cannot be quoted at subsequent hearings.

Victoria Atkins: I am happy to look at that. As I say, we will be consulting in the summer. We want also to understand the scale of sexual harassment in the workplace. By definition, it tends to be activity that is hidden and there is stigma to it. We want absolutely to make the point that it is not right for anyone, of any gender, of any sexuality, to suffer this sort of behaviour in the workplace.

Gender Pay Gap

7. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that businesses are held to account on reducing the gender pay gap. [910538]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): Gender pay gap reporting provides transparency for everyone in holding employers to account, and many organisations already recognise that closing the gap makes good business sense. I am writing to public sectors employers who are within scope of the regulations to urge them to develop action plans, and meeting influential business leaders to press them to take action in their sectors to make the best of the potential that their female employees can provide to them.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. What early assessment has she made of successful business compliance performance compared with that of last year?

Victoria Atkins: Before I answer that, I feel obliged to wish my hon. Friend good luck in the London marathon this weekend, as I do to all Members of this House who will be running those 26 miles—we hope it will be good weather.

I am sure the whole House joins me in being delighted that we have exceeded last year's compliance levels, with 95% of all employers believed to be in scope in the regulations having reported their data by the deadlines. We are confident that 100% compliance will be achieved shortly, and we have already seen the reporting rates rise to 98%.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): When across 45% of firms the discrepancy in pay increase is in favour of men this year, it is now clear that the Government's policy of asking companies simply to report on the gender pay gap is not enough. I welcome the Minister's response to the question about encouraging people, but will she now heed our advice and make it mandatory for companies also to produce action plans on how they will defeat this inequality against women?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I know she shares my enthusiasm and determination on this point. She will be pleased that already just under 50% of employers within scope are publishing their own action plans—they are doing that because they understand it makes good business sense. We believe that this is the best approach. Interestingly, 56% of employers have reported either reductions in their gender pay gaps or the fact that they are staying the same. There is a great deal of work to do, but we have to bring business with us; businesses have to realise that it makes good business

sense to close their gap and to treat their female staff properly. We believe that by encouraging them we will bring about the best result.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I welcome the progress that has been made in closing the gender pay gap and increasing the representation of women on company boards, but what are the Government doing to support low-paid, low-skilled women, who often seem to be left out of the conversation?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has distilled into his question the important point that the gender pay gap is not just about the heads of companies—directors and so on—important though that aspect is; it is also about helping women at the very lowest ends of the pay scales. We want to encourage them to seek better jobs and have better incomes. That is precisely why my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities is setting out a strong strategy on economic empowerment for women, so that they are treated fairly in the workplace, no matter their pay level, and ensuring that employers realise that if they are going to get the best of their workforce, they need to pay their female staff properly.

Universal Credit: Effect on Women

8. **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the roll-out of universal credit on women. [910539]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Universal credit treats all genders equally, and female employment is at a record high. The changes to the tax threshold and the national living wage and the increases to the universal credit work allowance will specifically assist women more on an ongoing basis.

Jessica Morden: On behalf of the Go Girls, a group of young parents in Newport, may I raise with the Minister one of the unfairnesses of the universal credit system? Lone parents who are under 25 get paid a lower rate than they would have been paid under tax credits, causing great hardship to young parents and children. Will the Minister help me to lobby the Department for Work and Pensions on the issue?

Guy Opperman: I note the point, which I have discussed with the hon. Lady previously. I am happy for the Minister with responsibility for this specific matter to sit down with the hon. Lady and her particular constituents to ensure that it is addressed, but I should make the point that this April we brought in the £1,000 increase to the UC work allowance, which should make a difference in the interim, before such a conversation takes place.

Topical Questions

T1. [910547] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): It is incredibly important to provide support and a route back to work for people who have taken time out to care

for others, and we want to find out the most effective way of doing so. Today, I am announcing that, as part of our returners programme, we are awarding grants to the Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation; to One Ark in Liverpool; to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, for projects in Yorkshire and Humber; and to Carer Support Wiltshire. These grants will be used for a number of initiatives to make it easier for people to return to the labour market and to discover how best to keep people economically active.

Mary Glendon: The housing association Habinteg recently launched a new advisory group for disabled people. The group has highlighted the impact that not having an accessible home has on people's employment, health and wellbeing. Will the Minister agree to meet representatives of the group to discuss their real concerns?

Penny Mordaunt: There is no excuse for new build homes especially not to be accessible. The Global Disability Innovation Hub set a challenge and has demonstrated that accessible homes can be built with no greater footprint and at no greater cost, so there is no excuse for local authorities not to do so. I would be happy to meet those representatives, and will suggest that to the Minister for Disabled People, too.

T2. [910548] **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Government have embarked on a significant programme of improvements to the transport system. Will they use their position in the public procurement process to support efforts to get more women working in construction, engineering and the railways?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): My right hon. Friend raises an important point, and the Government take these issues very seriously. For example, our apprenticeship diversity champions network is working in partnership with employers to help to overcome gender stereotypes in sectors such as science, technology, engineering and maths and industries such as construction. My right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that since 2010 there has been a 26% increase in the number of girls entering STEM A-levels in England, and that in the United Kingdom the number of women accepted on to full-time STEM undergraduate courses since 2010 has increased by 28%.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On 22 April, we marked the very first National Stephen Lawrence Day. It has been 26 years since his tragic racist murder. Sadly, as the Prime Minister acknowledged, racism and racial discrimination are still very prevalent in our society.

In 2018, the UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance stated that any measure that directly or indirectly targets and undermines the rights of marginalised groups must be understood as breaking international human rights law. This Government have presided over an immigration enforcement system in which people are being unfairly racially profiled; refused to allow people to bring forward discrimination claims based on more than one aspect of their identity; introduced voter ID, which will disenfranchise marginalised communities; failed to act on the results of their own racial disparity audit; and introduced hostile-environment

policies. Will the Minister inform the House whether, as well as breaking the UN's human rights law, her Government are institutionally racist or just do not care?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises some very important issues. I am sorry about the tone of her question, because I do not recognise the attitude that she implies among my colleagues, including the Prime Minister, who has done some groundbreaking work in this area. What I would say to her and other hon. Members who rightly are concerned about these issues is that part of the motivation for moving the Government Equalities Office into the Cabinet Office, so that it can sit alongside the race disparity team, is to look at these things in the round. As well as the issues that she identified, individuals in this country face multiple discrimination. For example, an enormous number of people sleeping on the streets in London are young, gay, black men. Only by working together and looking at the disaggregated data will we really understand how we can improve lives for everyone in this country.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Being part of the LGBT community is not a lifestyle choice and learning about LGBT issues is not what makes someone gay, lesbian or trans. What is being done by the Government to ensure that those outdated views have no place in our future society?

Nick Gibb: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. We have been clear in introducing relationships education and relationships and sex education that they are designed to foster respect for others and for difference, and to educate pupils about the different types of healthy relationships. Teaching about the diverse society that we live in can be delivered in a way that respects everyone's views.

T3. [910550] **Karen Lee** (Lincoln) (Lab): Because of the huge regional variations in maternity pay, according to the Fire Brigades Union's women's committee, most firefighters would be better off breaking a leg than having a baby. Will the Government consider an increased and properly enforced flat rate of maternity pay to tackle the gender and regional inequalities present in our fire service?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her FBU question. I would suggest that the FBU—[*Interruption.*] I have said this before, because it concerns me that there are no women on the FBU executive council. If the fire brigades workforce are to be looked after as we want them to be—Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary recently published a report looking at facilities for female firefighters across the country and was concerned to see, for example, two services with no designated shower facilities for female firefighters—then these changes must be made from the very top of our fire brigade community, making sure that women's voices are heard, because they are absolutely essential as part of our firefighting workforce.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Department of Health guidance in Northern Ireland says that Northern Ireland doctors referring women to GEO-funded free abortions in England could be breaking the criminal law.

Will the Minister publish her legal advice to enable the Department of Health to change that guidance, which surely is erroneous? Will she update the House on what she is doing to help women in Northern Ireland, such as Sarah Ewart and others, who are being required by law to continue pregnancies where doctors have already told them that their babies will die before they are born or shortly after?

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by thanking my right hon. Friend and the Women and Equalities Committee for an incredibly important piece of work? It not only looked at the legal and human rights issues, but got on record public opinion and the opinion of healthcare and legal professionals in Northern Ireland and showed the complete paucity of care being endured by women in Northern Ireland. With specific regard to the legal advice, I clarified in my evidence to her Committee via a letter that the legal advice that we received when the scheme was set up meant that it would not be a crime to refer to those services and that the issue that she raised in her question does not stand.

I have also met with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who looks at health inequalities. She believes that she already has the powers to provide guidance to ensure that no one is deterred from referring someone to a healthcare service that they need, and where their life may be in danger if they do not receive it, because of fear that doing so might be a crime. That is completely bogus, and she has undertaken to do that immediately. However, there is obviously more to do to put right this issue—with apologies for adding to my answer, Mr Speaker—so that every citizen of the United Kingdom can have the healthcare services that they need.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are running very late. I can live with that because my intention is, as always, to accommodate Back-Bench Members, but they could help each other by now contenting themselves with single-sentence questions.

T4. [910551] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What are the Government concretely doing to keep their promise to keep under review their rejection of lasting national legislation to protect women who enter abortion clinics? Ealing's pioneering buffer zone is now a year old, but it is going to need renewal. Councils are cash strapped and the Government have said that not enough women are being harmed. How many would it take—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but I clearly said that Members should be asking single-sentence questions. People have to be able to adjust. It is not difficult.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who has done a great deal of work on this issue in her constituency. We are keeping this matter under review. We are keen that local councils are able to use the powers that they have under the antisocial behaviour laws, if appropriate in their areas.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Recent research shows that the HPV vaccine has led to a dramatic decline in cervical cancer. Having a vaccination saves lives, so can

we use this opportunity to urge mums and dads across the UK to ensure that their kids have the measles vaccine?

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): My hon. Friend is exactly right. The evidence is clear that the MMR vaccine is safe and effective. Mums and dads should ensure that their children are vaccinated.

T5. [910552] **Anna Turley** (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): EVA Women's Aid in my constituency, which deals with nearly 1,000 vulnerable women a year, has had its rape and sexual abuse support fund grant cut, forcing it to look to close services. Will the Minister join me in urging her colleagues at the Ministry of Justice, which funds the organisation, to reconsider these cuts before crucial services to vulnerable women in Redcar and Cleveland are lost?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): As the hon. Lady will know, we are doing a great deal to support women, and men, who have suffered from domestic violence. The Domestic Abuse Bill is currently being looked at. The Government have pledged an additional £20 million over this Parliament to support victims and organisations combating domestic abuse. Women's Aid does a fantastic job.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): In light of recent objection to the Hereditary Titles (Female Succession) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that would address the discrimination against daughters when it comes to inheritance, when do the Government intend to end the practice of male primogeniture?

Penny Mordaunt: The Daughters' Rights campaign was started after one new mum was told that her new arrival being a girl must have been a disappointment to her. This matter and the issue of courtesy titles are complex matters, but we do need to look at them in this modern age. My Department is working on that, and I welcome the Daughters' Rights campaign.

T6. [910553] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister said that there was more to do in relation to abortion services in Northern Ireland. Will she set out how, with the absence of the Northern Ireland Executive, she will work across Government to ensure that there is a clear framework and timeline for stopping the breaches of women's human rights in Northern Ireland and for when we will be compliant with the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women?

Penny Mordaunt: The Northern Ireland Office has the lead on this issue, and it is waiting on a potential declaration of incompatibility. There has never been a case of such a declaration being issued and the Government not taking action. I alluded earlier to the fact that I am focusing on what we can do with the powers that we have to ensure that, within the current restrictions, every woman who needs particular healthcare services has access to them.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Shared parental leave is a good option for families, but take-up remains low. Will my right hon. Friend join me in urging the Business Secretary to introduce a standalone

period of parental leave just for partners, to give families more choices and help women to balance work and family?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that she has been doing to campaign on this issue, along with a number of our Conservative colleagues. We are looking at this as part of the women's economic empowerment strategy. We want parents to have the choice as to how they share caring responsibilities, and we know that there are practical, as well as cultural, barriers to them doing so.

T7. [910554] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): When will the Government consult on changes to the law to protect employees from being sexually harassed by customers or clients? It was announced last December. When will it take place?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady may have heard my answer to a previous question. We will consult in the summer on sexual harassment in the workplace and I would encourage her and all colleagues across the House to contribute to that consultation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Against the background of the highest ever level of employment in our country's history, which employment rate is growing faster—male or female?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Both are growing, but female in particular.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Can the Minister detail what the terms of reference will be for the period poverty taskforce and confirm how many members will be chosen to ensure diverse representation?

Penny Mordaunt: I refer the hon. Lady to a written ministerial statement I tabled this week for an update. The first meeting of the taskforce will be in June, and we will be making announcements about who will be on it, but it will have three co-chairs: one from Government, one from the private sector and one from the charity and social sector.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): In the response to the consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004, what consideration is being given to the approach of the International Association of Athletics Federations and its use of testosterone levels to determine whether a trans athlete competes in a women's or a men's race?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises an important issue, although it is slightly separate from the very narrow remit of the Gender Recognition Act. Every Department is facing all sorts of issues in relation to trans people, so we have brought together a team of Ministers and officials across Government to make sure that policy is where it needs to be. I have also had separate meetings with the Minister for Sport to discuss both elite and community sport. Many of these decisions, particularly at the elite level, are for sporting bodies to lead on, although there are safety issues as well. I can assure her that these will be ongoing meetings across all Departments and that we will make sure that every Department provides services and support and has the right policies in place for modern times.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm the Government's position on whether the automatic parental right of men who have fathered children through rape should be removed?

Lucy Frazer: I know that the hon. Lady is passionate about this, and I am pleased she has taken up this very important campaign. The Ministry of Justice is looking very closely at it. I have mentioned before that the civil procedure rule committee is looking at the issue she has raised in the past about applications to court. It will have a further meeting at the beginning of May, and I will be very happy to update her on that when the meeting has taken place.

Karen Lee: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Not now. We have three urgent questions and a business statement. There will be points of order in due course.

UK Telecoms: Huawei

10.48 am

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the future role of Huawei in UK telecoms infrastructure.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The security and resilience of the United Kingdom's telecoms networks is of paramount importance. The UK has one of the world's largest and most dynamic economies, and we welcome open trade and inward investment in our digital sectors, but at the same time the UK's economy can only prosper when we and our international partners are assured that our critical national infrastructure remains safe and secure.

As part of our plans to provide world-class digital connectivity, including 5G, my Department has been carrying out a cross-Whitehall evidence-based review of the supply chain to ensure a diverse and secure supply base. The review aims to ensure stronger cyber-security across the entire telecommunications sector, greater resilience in telecommunications networks and diversity across the entire 5G supply chain. It has considered the full UK market position, including economic prosperity, corporate and consumer effects and the quality, resilience and security of equipment.

Despite the inevitable focus on Huawei, the review is not solely about one company or even one country. We have to strike a difficult balance between security and prosperity, and recognise the reality of globalised networks and supply chains, although I will make it clear that our security interests are pre-eminent and that has been the focus of this review. That is the way to ensure that the UK fully realises the potential of 5G through its safe and secure deployment.

As would be expected given the importance of the subject, it is a thorough review of a complex area, which has made use of the best available expert advice and evidence, including from the National Cyber Security Centre. It will report with its conclusions once ministerial decisions have been taken. The review is an important step in strengthening the UK's security framework for telecoms and ensuring the secure roll-out of 5G and full-fibre networks.

I am sure that the House will understand that National Security Council discussions should be confidential, and will understand why that must be the case. However, I know that Members on both side of the House feel strongly on this issue and I will make a statement to the House to communicate final decisions at the appropriate time.

Jo Platt: Thank you for granting this urgent question today, Mr Speaker.

What a mess we are in. The only reason we know of the decision to green-light Huawei is from an apparent ministerial leak of a meeting of the National Security Council, which has served only to raise public concern while undermining the integrity of our security agencies. Let me be clear from this side of the House: if a Minister did leak this information, they are not fit to serve in the cabinet and are certainly not fit to be Prime Minister. Indeed, if the leak was for an advantage in a

Tory leadership race, that would be truly shocking. Critical issues of national security should be handled with utmost care, not used as political ammunition in a Tory party civil war. A full leak inquiry should be undertaken, and if identified, the individual should immediately resign or be removed from their position.

Turning to the substance of the question, the decision to allow Huawei's involvement in building our 5G network raises some extremely serious questions that must be answered if we are to provide the public with concrete assurances about the integrity and safety of the network. Huawei is a company known from multiple public reports from our security services to manufacture sub-optimal equipment, often at a lower than average cost. Can the Minister clarify if the equipment described just two weeks ago by the technical director of the NCSC as "very, very shoddy" will be the same equipment green-lit for deployment in our networks?

We heard last month in a report from the Huawei oversight board, chaired by the head of the NCSC, that it still has only limited assurance that the long-term security risks presented by Huawei can be managed, and it is still identifying significant issues. For the benefit of the House, can the Minister confirm that is still the opinion of the security services when the Prime Minister has decided to allow them access to our 5G networks for the decades to come?

We need not listen only to the security services: listen to Huawei itself. In a letter to the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee in February, it said that it will take three to five years to see tangible results from its reform programme. Just weeks after those warnings, why has the company been given the go-ahead to help to build our critical national infrastructure?

Why are we in this situation today? Ultimately, the chronic lack of investment by the Government has meant that we are without thriving digital or manufacturing industries capable of producing this equipment, leaving us reliant on foreign suppliers. To that end, the Government must be called out for their negligence. The only way we will keep Britain safe and secure in the 21st century is by investing in our industries, rebuilding Britain and always placing security ahead of cost. That is exactly what a Labour Government would do.

Jeremy Wright: First, let me repeat what I said a moment or two ago. A final decision has not been made on this subject, so the hon. Lady is wrong to describe matters in the way that she has. However, I entirely agree with what she said about the leak of any discussions in the National Security Council. As she says, there is good reason for such discussions to be confidential, and I hope the House will understand that I do not intend to discuss here, or anywhere other than in the National Security Council, the matters that should be discussed there. The reason we do not is that officials, including the security and intelligence agents she has referred to in her remarks, which I will come back to, need to feel that they can give advice to Ministers that Ministers will treat seriously and keep private. If they do not feel that, they will not give us that advice, and government will be worse as a result. That is why this is serious, and that is why the Government intend to treat it seriously, as she and the whole House would expect.

I shall now respond to the other points that the hon. Lady raised. She made reference, quite properly, to the work of the oversight board. Of course the oversight

board is evidence of the fact that we have arrangements in place for the management of Huawei technology that do not exist for the management of equipment supplied by others; there is reason for that. The oversight board's concerns are, as she says, about the technical deficiencies of the equipment that Huawei is supplying. They are serious concerns; they need to be addressed. They are not, as she will recognise, concerns about the manipulation of that equipment by foreign powers, but they are none the less serious and they will be addressed. The objective of this review is to ensure that the security of the supply network, regardless of who the equipment supplier is, is improved. That is our objective, and it would be wrong to focus entirely on Huawei, or even, as I said, on Chinese equipment.

However, it is worth recognising that Chinese equipment—and, indeed, Huawei equipment—is prevalent across the world, not just in the United Kingdom. There is a good deal of Huawei equipment already in the UK networks, so we are not talking about beginning from a standing start, but it reinforces, in my view, the need to ensure that this review of the supply chain is broadly based—as it is—to ensure that we address the security of the network, regardless of where the equipment comes from.

Finally, on the issue of the security and intelligence agencies, as the hon. Lady would expect, we take full account of what the security and intelligence agencies have advised us on this subject, and she has my reassurance, as does the House, that we will continue to take seriously what they tell us, because it is a key component of the review that is being conducted—and that is being conducted, as I have indicated, with the full input of the National Cyber Security Centre.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is quite right to make no comment at all on an apparent leak from an organisation like the National Security Council. But questions must be asked as to why a document such as this, of such huge national and international security importance, was being discussed openly at the National Security Council, and indeed the content of the document itself equally is worthy of much further inquiry across Whitehall and in this place. Would my right hon. and learned Friend perhaps welcome an inquiry by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, on which I serve, into the document, the way it was handled by the National Security Council, and the way in which the leak occurred?

Jeremy Wright: I think it is entirely appropriate for the Committee on which my hon. Friend serves to make inquiries as it thinks fit. It is not a matter for me or for the Government to indicate what it should or should not do. He will recognise, of course, that these are documents that should be discussed by the National Security Council—it is a way in which the National Security Council can make sensible and properly informed decisions—but as I said a moment or so ago, and as he knows full well from his own experience, that will become less and less likely to happen, and decisions will get less and less properly based, if we cannot trust people to keep private what should be kept private.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): As I see it, there are two major considerations. In the UK we are lagging behind China, the USA and South Korea. The fact that

we are even talking about this issue is a strong indication that there has been a lack of a realistic UK Government-backed strategy, and that has allowed us to fall behind, and we are now facing tough decisions, which could and should have been avoided. There is the threat of espionage, which is obviously denied by China. There have been persistent rumours since 2012 of an elite cyber-warfare unit using either Huawei's software or flaws in it. Why it should go to such lengths when the NSC leaks like a sieve is beyond me, but if we do not know, how we can possibly take that risk?

I have two brief questions for the Secretary of State. Can he define the “core” and the “edge” of a 5G network and assure me that it cannot be compromised from either side? As EE is building 4G to carry emergency services, with its planned 5G piggybacking on that, will Huawei's 5G plan disrupt that service?

Jeremy Wright: First, there is no lack of UK strategy. We have a clear intent to make maximum use of 5G technology. That is important because, as the hon. Gentleman will recognise, in order for our economic development to be as successful as we all want it to be, this country will need to embrace this technology and make use of it in a variety of ways. The option of simply saying we will not engage in 5G technology is not available to us, nor should it be, and I know he does not argue for that.

If we need to provide for 5G networks, I repeat that it is important to be realistic and to recognise that Huawei is a significant player in this market. There are few others—and, by the way, the others that exist use Chinese equipment or assemble their components in China. The idea that any option available to us could completely exclude Chinese equipment or involvement of any kind is, I am afraid, not realistic.

It is also worth saying, for the reassurance of the hon. Gentleman and others, that we already take action to, for example, exclude Huawei from sensitive networks. There is no Huawei equipment in defence or intelligence networks. The division between core and access networks—which, as he says, is technically complex—is something we will need to address in the review, but I would much prefer that we discuss that review in the round when it has been properly developed, rather than attempt to do it piecemeal on the back of incomplete leaks.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): The Secretary of State talks about coming to the House with a final decision. Is this not an opportunity to have a wide-ranging debate about this issue? There are many technical, political and security considerations. If the US and Australia can block Huawei without damaging their trading relationships with China, it raises the question of why the United Kingdom could not do the same.

Jeremy Wright: I recognise my hon. Friend's considerable interest and expertise in this field. I will say two things to him. First, he is entirely right that Australia has decided to exclude Huawei completely from these systems. The United States has not yet made such a decision. It does so from federal networks, but it has not yet decided what its approach will be in the areas we are considering.

As my hon. Friend knows, I always welcome wide-ranging debate and am happy to come to the House for it. The difficulty is that, in order to have such debate,

[Jeremy Wright]

we need to have access to material that is very hard to share with the House. That is why these discussions are had at the National Security Council and why decisions must, in the end, be reached there. It is then the responsibility of Ministers—I take this responsibility seriously—to come to the House and explain those decisions to the greatest extent possible, with those caveats. I always intended to do so and still intend to do so.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Why does the Secretary of State think that Australia has taken that decision?

Jeremy Wright: I do not answer for the Australian Government; the hon. Lady would have to ask them. We are all—this applies particularly to Five Eyes partners—wrestling with these complex questions, and we may reach differing conclusions. There is good sense in having those conversations as extensively and often as we can. In fact, the Government will be doing so shortly with security and intelligence partners, and I have no doubt that this subject will be high on the agenda.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that partners—in fact, our closest intelligence partners—have been very clear in their views on this decision? Indeed, the Australian Signals Directorate made a very clear statement only a number of months ago in which it said that there was no such division between core and non-core, because the nature of 5G includes the whole gamut of the technology in one, and therefore the distinction possible in 3G and 4G is no longer feasible.

Does my right hon. and learned Friend also agree that this is not simply a technical issue—arguing about whether we would be vulnerable to espionage in a broad sense or whether Huawei would be able to Hoover up the digital exhaust that is in fact the gold mine for so many businesses today—but a diplomatic one, undermining the trust that has built the 70-year relationship we know as the Five Eyes community, which keeps threats away from our shores and ensures the security of our citizens around the world? Does he not therefore see that this is fundamentally a diplomatic and political question, just as much as a technical one, and that respecting our Five Eyes partners is an essential part of the decision?

Jeremy Wright: On my hon. Friend's last point, I entirely agree. It is important that we do not just discuss these matters with our partners, but have rather more complex and detailed technical discussions about the precise restrictions we may all seek to impose, and there is no lack of respect for what they say in this. Of course, many of our Five Eyes partners are operating under some difficulty, as Members of this House are, in that they do not know all of the decision making because some of it is not yet complete.

It is worth recognising that my hon. Friend is right that the concerns our partners have expressed are legitimate concerns. We listen very carefully to what they say, and we listen very carefully too to what our own security and intelligence agencies say. For reasons he will appreciate perhaps better than almost anyone else in this House, I do not intend to go into any detail about that, but I

repeat my reassurance that we will act in full consideration of what they say, because it is an important and fundamental part of this review.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): This leak is not only embarrassing, but, I am afraid, symptomatic of a wider breakdown of discipline and collective responsibility in the Government. This decision should be taking into account both our national security needs and our technological requirements for the future. Those should be the only two things under consideration by Ministers, not their own political share price or anything else. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that, in our altered post-Brexit geopolitical position, there is no question of future trade requirements or the urgency of a trade deal with China influencing national security judgments?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with what the right hon. Gentleman has said about the importance of this decision and the considerations that legitimately play a part. This decision will be taken by the Government as a whole, but the recommendations of this review have been produced by my Department in collaboration with the intelligence agencies, particularly the National Cyber Security Centre, as I have said. We have done that with the country's security considerations pre-eminent among the issues that are discussed and will be put forward at that review. That will remain the case for as long as I lead this Department and have anything to say about it.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): We are only here today because there has been a leak. That is incredibly regrettable for the whole of the House—I have heard that opinion from both sides of the House—and national security could not be a more important topic for all of us to be discussing. I am a little concerned that the leak may be trivialised by saying that it is as a result of someone's leadership campaign. I am more concerned that it may be as a result of whistleblowing, because the process is so concerning to someone that they have felt the need to break the bond of trust that has existed for so long.

I accept that the review is going on at the moment in great secrecy, but since this has now been brought out into the open, can my right hon. and learned Friend assure the House that absolutely every consideration will be given to all the concerns that have been raised by hon. Members here today about both our relationship with countries such as Australia and our cyber-security and national security? Importantly, will he make sure that some concept of future deals with China is not colouring what we must now have absolutely at the forefront of our mind—the safety of the British public?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. That will indeed be the focus of this review, as she has just heard me say. I do not think that the motivation for this leak matters in the slightest. This was unacceptable, and it is corrosive of the ability to deliver good government, which is something for which we must all take responsibility. In discussions of this kind, people are entitled to express whatever views they wish—and they do—but once the discussion has been held, collective responsibility requires that people do not repeat their views publicly, and they certainly should not discuss matters that have a security implication of

this kind. I think that is clear, and the majority of Members of the House will agree. We will return to the substance of this issue when I have the opportunity to speak rather more freely than I can at the moment, and I will of course give the House as much detail as I can.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Protecting this country's national security must be non-negotiable, but there have also been reports, including in *The Daily Telegraph*, that Chinese technology companies have been complicit in the internal repression of ethnic Muslims in western China. That involves the internment of hundreds of thousands of people in "re-education" camps, and the creation of a surveillance state, and it is possible that that includes Huawei. Is the Secretary of State aware of any allegations that specifically involve Huawei, and if so, should we be doing business with a company that engages in that sort of activity?

Jeremy Wright: As the right hon. Gentleman says, our concerns about Huawei are at least in part due to the potential interlocking nature of what it does and what the Chinese state does. That lies at the heart of our concerns, hence the oversight mechanisms with which he is familiar. We will, of course, take full account not just of what he has said, but of all our other information when making our judgment. He will understand that the involvement of the intelligence and security agencies in that process is fundamental and integral, and it means that we can get a good sense of the sort of information he describes.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am not encouraging my right hon. and learned Friend to comment on the substance of leak, but while that leak might become the subject of a criminal investigation, does he agree it is important that people both in and outside this House choose their words carefully when talking about what happened yesterday?

Jeremy Wright: I agree with my hon. Friend, as she would expect, and she speaks with experience on this matter. We cannot exclude the possibility of a criminal investigation, and everybody will want to take that suggestion seriously. We are all entitled to say what many of us have already said about the undesirability of this kind of leak, and it is perfectly proper for the House to express its concern in such a way.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is being very open and reasonable, but does he agree that fundamentally this is all about trust? When I was a very young MP, one of my first parliamentary jobs was to go to Hong Kong as part of a parliamentary delegation, to assess the agreement that this country reached with China on the future of Hong Kong. This very week we have seen how China has shredded that agreement by taking those democracy protesters and giving them long prison sentences. The Secretary of State says that we want a broad-ranging inquiry, but Syngenta in my constituency has been taken over by ChemChina. That is not on the stock exchange; that is the Chinese Government buying into our economy. We must look at that seriously as it is a question of trust.

Jeremy Wright: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and as I have said, the approach that we take to Huawei is different in nature to the approach we

already take to other suppliers of similar equipment. He will recognise that the problem is not specific to the United Kingdom, and neither is it easy to resolve by simply saying, "We'll have nothing to do with the Chinese". As I have set out, a considerable amount of Chinese equipment is already in the system both here and elsewhere, and a considerable amount of Chinese components are in the supplies that we get from anywhere. This is not straightforward, hence the need for the type of review that we have engaged in, to discuss the issue sensibly and reach considered conclusions. The hon. Gentleman knows me well enough to know that that is my preferred approach, and that is what I intend to do.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the UK relies on many international tech companies for its digital and telecoms infrastructure? All have different levels of risk, but all have contributed to enabling the UK to have the largest digital economy as a percentage of GDP in the G20. Can he assure me that the British Government would not take undue and unnecessary risk with citizens' data or national security, whether our partners be Chinese or the US, international or domestic?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a good point. As I said, the purpose of the review process is not simply to answer questions about Huawei or even to answer questions about China; it is to ensure that our telecoms supply chain is secure for the future regardless of where the equipment comes from. That is our objective and that is the sensible approach.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Since it was leaked that the Prime Minister has given the green light to Huawei's involvement with 5G, what representations has the Secretary of State had from Huawei's competitors?

Jeremy Wright: Again, I think the way in which the hon. Gentleman has phrased what has happened is incorrect. I have made clear what the position is. Of course, we will listen to those in the sector, as we listen to others. In the end, however, the judgment that the UK Government have to make is how we ensure that our telecoms system is secure, safe and provides the kind of 5G network that will be the foundation of our economic success in the future. That is the objective here and that is what we will pursue.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Secretary of State set out what steps the Government are taking to ensure the UK remains at the forefront of the development of new technologies like 5G? In particular, what are the Government doing to ensure that rural areas, like those in my own constituency in the Scottish borders, are not left behind as the 5G network is rolled out?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right. It is important that we recognise the need to ensure this technology serves our whole population and that its potential is properly developed. As he will know, the Government, in conjunction with others, are attempting to develop this technology in test beds, particularly, as he will know, in rural applications, which I hope will be of

[Jeremy Wright]

benefit to him and his constituents. I believe that that can transform how our citizens connect to the essential services we now all use.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I should declare an interest, having spent 20 years building out mobile and fixed networks around the world, working with a variety of vendors including Huawei and latterly for the regulator Ofcom.

Mobile networks are an increasingly critical part of our national infrastructure, but the regulatory framework has not kept pace since 2010. For example, it has not matched the resilience and security requirements of fixed networks. 5G makes mobile networks part of the everyday infrastructure of our lives, but it will be built out using existing components and network parts where, in many cases, Huawei is already present—it is based on 4G, for example. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need a transparent principles-based and standards-based resilience and security regulatory framework? Will he comment on why Ofcom has not provided that under the duties set out in section 105 of the Communications Act 2003? Will he ensure that in the future Ofcom has the resources and the powers to ensure it does?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady is right. The importance of the review is that it deals with the need to ensure security is in place for the mobile network, as it is elsewhere. That becomes increasingly important as we move towards extensive applications of 5G. That is the logic for the review. That is why it is important and that is why it is happening now. Ofcom will have its part to play in that process. She will understand why I do not talk now about the conclusions of the review, but I will discuss them when they are available. I have no doubt that she will wish to participate in that conversation.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Following on from the question from the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), does the Secretary of State recognise that there are legitimate human rights concerns about reports of the use of technology by Chinese authorities to monitor its own citizens—for example, the recent reports of the extensive use of facial recognition technology by Chinese law enforcement agencies to characterise people by social groups, race or ethnicity and to monitor the movements of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of minority Uighur Muslims simply going about their daily business?

Jeremy Wright: Those are legitimate concerns, and they are the reason why we have to consider companies that are closely connected with, or potentially influenced by, the Chinese state in a different category. As I have said, however, there is a practical problem, which is that if our objective were to exclude all Chinese equipment from these systems, we would find that exceptionally difficult to do. There is a balance to be struck. The purpose of this exercise is to ensure that we do not expose our systems and our citizens to risks that we can sensibly and prudently avoid. That is what the review is designed to do, and I believe that it will succeed.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When the Foreign Affairs Committee was in Beijing recently, every single person whom we spoke to made it absolutely clear that

the Chinese Communist party would stop at nothing to gain whatever economic or political advantage it could possibly achieve, whether through espionage, massive data gathering or the abuse of intellectual property rights. The people whom we met will be enormously sceptical about direct engagement with Huawei, a company that operates directly under Chinese law and is likely at any one moment suddenly to be seized by the Chinese state to perform its duties under that law rather than the law of this country.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, right about those concerns, which are legitimately held. Let me repeat, however—I know that he understands this—that we are not at a standing start. There is already considerable engagement with Huawei, not just in this country but around the world, and we seek to manage that process in the ways that he knows about. The long-term aspiration of broadening the market and diversifying suppliers is absolutely the right one, and I hope very much that the review will address those issues, too, but that in itself will not be a quick fix. We will seek to do it, but it will take some time to broaden the market beyond what are now essentially three suppliers in this space and three only.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If the National Security Council is not secure, what is the point of it?

Jeremy Wright: The point of the National Security Council is to enable us to discuss matters of national security, and we will continue to need to do that. I suspect that my hon. Friend will have detected in what I have said my view of the importance of those conversations remaining confidential.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Today's *Financial Times* quotes Rob Joyce, a senior cyber-security adviser to the US National Security Agency, as saying:

"We are not going to give them the loaded gun."

He said of the oversight board:

"For eight years they have had the cyber security centre there and the last several years there have been some really horrific reports about the quality of that activity and what's being produced."

How seriously should we take those comments?

Jeremy Wright: Of course we take comments of that kind seriously, but it is important when people reach a judgment on these matters that they are in possession of all the facts, all the evidence and all the advice that we receive from many sources, including the security and intelligence agencies. It is difficult for anyone who does not sit around the National Security Council table to have access to all those different materials, but, as I have said, what is important is that we produce a secure system that will deliver safely a 5G from which all our constituents will benefit—including, importantly, those in Warwickshire. That is what we seek to do, and that is what the review is for.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I, too, must declare an interest: I spent 31 years in the telecoms and high-tech industry before coming to this place.

My right hon. Friend has indicated that Huawei's technology, while niche, is not unique and that there are alternatives. The lesson of 3G and 4G procurement is that technological solutions came along quite quickly during the process. Will my right hon. Friend confirm

that, whatever decision is made, this process will be subject to open competition and companies will be able to compete freely for our business?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, whose experience is valuable in this discussion. He is right that we must also consider the competition aspects, not just from an economic point of view, but from a security point of view. It is obviously better to have a number of different suppliers, not just because it helps with the economics, but because it makes the network more secure. The difficulty, as he will recognise, is that essentially there are only three suppliers in this space: Huawei, Nokia and Ericsson. There are difficulties, on a number of levels, with the assumption that were we to exclude Huawei and rely entirely on the other two suppliers, we would have a safe network as a result. That is not the right assumption to make. That is why the review process is more complex than it might initially appear to be.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): As well as the current controversy over safety and security, there is another aspect to this: the safety of human health. Will the Secretary of State assure me that whatever company he chooses as the main contractor will have to take full account of the impact on human health and ensure that any infrastructure minimises any possible danger to human health?

Jeremy Wright: Of course that is important, and the hon. Gentleman will know that colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are working on this. Whatever use we make of this technology and whoever supplies it, it is important that human health considerations are taken into account.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Over the past few years, many serious questions have been raised over Huawei, so it seems reckless even to consider it for the 5G network. The Secretary of State said earlier that Huawei is not operating in sensitive or defence areas, but as we become ever more reliant on the internet of things the ability to shut down a network poses a serious threat to our national security. If he is so confident about Huawei's integrity, why is it not operating in sensitive areas?

Jeremy Wright: We of course recognise that there is a material distinction between Huawei and other suppliers, and that is its potential interconnection with the Chinese state. It is therefore sensible for the UK to ensure that when we are dealing with particularly sensitive networks, Huawei is not involved. That process is well understood by both sides. Of course, the Chinese would apply a very similar principle to non-Chinese companies in China. But that is not what we are talking about in relation to the entire telecommunications network. The hon. Lady is entirely right that we must have the greatest possible security on our 5G systems, because as we do more and more with those systems, the consequences of someone being able to influence them at a fundamental level become more and more severe. That is exactly why the review is needed.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In the 1980s, Britain was a world leader in the development of fibre-optic broadband, but we have since lost that

capability as a result of the privatisation and fragmentation of Britain Telecom and GEC-Marconi. We are now reliant on Ericsson, Nokia and Huawei, as the Minister has said. Is it not clear that, with the development of the internet of things, which has huge industrial potential, the opportunity now is for Britain to build a national champion in this space, perhaps working with Five Eyes partners and other close allies, that could deliver an internationally competitive capability in its own right?

Jeremy Wright: I know that it is tempting for Opposition Members to blame everything on privatisation, but I do not think that is fair in this context. The point about a potential alternative contender, whether a national champion or something developed in concert with others, is something we should of course consider. However, as the hon. Gentleman will recognise, that will not happen overnight, even if we and others are determined to achieve it. The more pressing problem for us to address is this: if we need to get our 5G systems up and running—I suggest that we do, in order not to fall behind in all these important economic areas—we need a system in place that enables us to develop those networks with the existing technology coming from existing suppliers. I repeat that we have a very limited choice available to us. The purpose of the review is to find a way to navigate that marketplace without sacrificing our security.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Our security services say that this is the first ever leak from the National Security Council. May I press the Secretary of State to tell us whether there will be a criminal investigation?

Jeremy Wright: As the hon. Gentleman will recognise, that is not a matter for me. What I have said this morning —[*Interruption.*] What I said when I spoke 10 minutes ago was that I cannot rule that out, and nor can anyone else. It is a matter for the investigating and then prosecuting authorities to consider. It is not a matter for me. However, the leak can be condemned by us all, whether or not it is proceeded against in a criminal way.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Huawei has been banned from the core of 5G, but it is to be allowed to operate at the edge. The edge includes masts and antennas, which are also very sensitive. Canada and New Zealand have expressed concern, and Australia and the United States of America have said there is no relevant distinction between the core and the edge of 5G networks. What discussions has the Minister had with those four countries, and has their determination had any influence on our decision?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman will know from our discussions this morning that these are important conversations with our Five Eyes partners, and they are continuing, as he would expect. I repeat the point that, as yet, the final decisions on this matter have not been taken, so we should not characterise it in that sense. However, it is vital that when we come to make the decisions, we consider all relevant matters. I repeat my reassurance to him that the priority in all those considerations will be security. That is why this review was commenced in the first place. That is its purpose, and that is what we seek to achieve with it.

Electoral Registration: EU Citizens

11.31 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will please make a statement on the electoral registration process for EU citizens for the 2019 European elections.

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue. It is important that we ensure that everyone is aware of what they can do to ensure they are able to exercise their right to vote, should that opportunity arise. We have been clear on our intention as a Government that we want to leave the EU as soon as possible and not have to hold these elections.

Electoral registration officers have a statutory duty to ensure that people who are eligible to vote in relevant elections have the opportunity to do so. With regard to the potential European parliamentary elections, that includes ensuring that EU citizens from other member states who are resident in the UK and registered to vote are aware that they need to complete a declaration, commonly referred to as a UC1 or EC6 form, in order to do so. I will place a copy of that form in the Library of the House today. To vote in the UK, citizens of other EU member states need to be registered to vote, and to complete the declaration form stating their wish to vote in the UK, by Tuesday 7 May 2019. This form is accessible on the Electoral Commission website and on local authority websites. This is to ensure that EU citizens do not vote twice—here and in their member state of origin—because it is obviously illegal to vote twice in the same election.

The Electoral Commission has issued advice on what action to take on this, and it was circulated to all local authority electoral officers on 4 April. The Electoral Commission's guidance advises that, while the law does not require electoral registration officers to send the form out to all EU citizens, it has in previous years advised that EROs should identify those local government electors who are EU citizens and send them a UC1 form, to help to ensure that they understand their options and are able to exercise their right to vote, should they wish to do so. It further advises that, if the date of the poll is confirmed, electoral registration officers be encouraged to take other steps to raise awareness, such as through social media channels and elsewhere. The Electoral Commission said that it was also looking to support EROs in this and to work with partners to spread the message more widely. The commission's advice is that EROs

"should think about how you can make EU citizens clear of the options available to them: the information on the UC1 form should help you to do this".

While the Government support the work to encourage electoral registration, the legal process of registration is obviously the responsibility of electoral registration officers rather than the Government. Prior to the extension of article 50, we had already encouraged EU citizens to vote in their home countries in the 2019 European parliamentary elections. We expect that most EU citizens in the UK will have followed previous advice to ensure that they can vote in their member state of citizenship.

Catherine West: I am concerned that EU citizens living in the UK have to undergo a two-stage process to vote in the European elections. Even if they are already registered to vote in the local elections next Thursday, they are separately required, unlike UK nationals, to complete an additional form to vote in the European elections three weeks later. That added layer of administration is rightly designed to prevent EU citizens from voting twice. However, the Cabinet Office has also inferred that preferential status must not be conferred to EU citizens in the process. That scenario only really applies when the EU registers are open, but there is no uniformity among EU member states. Indeed, the majority of EU registers have now closed.

Under normal circumstances, had the Brexit shambles not taken over, councils would have written to EU citizens in January, when all EU registers were open, to confirm the UK register in good time. They would have sent out reminders and issued polling cards to electors who are already on the register for the local elections, but we are not in normal circumstances. Our participation in the European elections was confirmed by the Prime Minister very late in the day, and the additional EC6 process is largely superfluous given that the majority of EU registers have already closed.

Far from giving preference to EU citizens, these unusual circumstances and the Government's lack of action have helped to create an artificial barrier to the enfranchisement of EU citizens. Indeed, we are already hearing reports of a formal legal challenge to the Government. This is yet another Brexit mistake. In July 2018, the integrity of our democracy was questioned when Vote Leave was found guilty of breaking electoral law. Today, our democracy faces another threat: Government-sanctioned barriers that could prevent EU citizens from registering to vote.

There are now 13 days until the voter registration deadline. Given the shortness of time, and the late hour at which local authorities were informed of this major U-turn in Government policy on participation in the European elections, can the Minister answer one clear question? Will he confirm that local authorities will be permitted to register automatically EU citizens who are already registered to vote in next week's local elections, on 2 May, so that they can participate in the European elections a mere 21 days later?

Brandon Lewis: I have a couple of things to say to the hon. Lady. First, we obviously would not be in this position if she and more of her colleagues had voted for the deal on 29 March, because we would not be holding these elections, and there still may be an opportunity not to hold them. Secondly, local elections are different, because residents can vote more than once, in different places where they pay council tax. The structure is very different—*[Interruption.]* I can see the hon. Lady gesticulating, but people can vote more than once in local elections, as Members of Parliament often do. Things are different in European elections, and it is right that we do what we can to ensure that people vote only once.

As for the process, if colleagues look at the UC1 form—as I said, I will lay a copy in the Library today for colleagues who have not seen it—they will see that it probably takes 30 seconds to a minute to complete. The same process was used in the 2014 European elections,

and it dates back to the European Parliamentary Elections (Franchise of Relevant Citizens of the Union) Regulations 2001, so some Labour Members will have supported it when they were in government.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given that today marks the nomination deadline for the European elections and that many local authorities will be considering sending out postal votes early in the process, will my right hon. Friend confirm what guidance has been given to electoral registration officers about postal votes, particularly for European citizens who choose to vote in these elections?

Brandon Lewis: The advice from the Electoral Commission to EROs is that they should follow the same processes. Everything will be exactly the same as it was in 2014, so there will be no difference in how postal vote notices go out. This is about ensuring that European residents who want to vote here and have not already registered to vote in their home member state, which we have been recommending for a year that they do, are able to register should they wish to do so.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for bringing this important question to the House.

It has never been the desire of the Labour party to take part in the upcoming European parliamentary elections. However, it is now becoming a reality following the Government's failure to reach a satisfactory Brexit deal. The uncertainty caused by the Government's shambolic Brexit negotiations is causing havoc in this country, particularly for electoral administrators who are now tasked with delivering a national poll at extremely short notice.

Some 2 million EU citizens who are already registered to vote in this country have until 7 May to complete and return a declaration form to take part in the European elections. In normal circumstances, returning officers would have started writing to registered EU citizens in January to ensure that they have completed the necessary paperwork, which cannot be done electronically. Prior to the 2016 EU referendum, the Electoral Commission began the process of identifying proposals for streamlining this administrative two-step process. However, because this Government repeatedly stated that European elections would not take place, the Electoral Commission decided not to continue working out this area of reform.

Because the Government maintained their position on EU elections at the eleventh hour, even when it was clear that their botched Brexit deal would not pass, returning officers have only just started the process of contacting registered European citizens. There are now only 13 days left until the deadline and, so far, fewer than 300 forms have been returned, which equates to 0.015% of registered EU citizens.

Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) raised our concerns that thousands of EU citizens will be casting their vote in local elections but will be denied that same right in the European elections, and that many are considering legal action. The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office,

the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), failed to provide proper assurances that this issue is being taken seriously.

Given the shortness of time and the late hour at which local authorities were informed of this major U-turn, we have four demands of the Government. Will they give EU citizens more time to return their declaration forms by extending the deadline from 7 May to 15 May? Will they provide EU citizens with more chances to be aware of their options by ensuring electors are handed a copy of the declaration form when they vote in local elections? Will they pay for all costs associated with maximising participation in the European elections by EU citizens, given the short notice and therefore the higher cost of getting people to sign up? And will they make the registration process easier by confirming that scanned or photographed forms are acceptable?

It is unacceptable that European citizens living here risk being denied their right to vote because of the Government's incompetent approach to Brexit. This chaos must end.

Brandon Lewis: On one of the hon. Lady's last points—I invite her to look at the form later in the Library—I am not sure how the form could be simplified any further. It literally takes 30 seconds to fill it in; it is a very simple, direct form. On the wider issues, the Electoral Commission is the body responsible for ensuring that these processes are followed through legally, and I am sure it will be listening and looking at what she has outlined.

We have been very clear about advising EU citizens over the last year to make sure that, for the European elections, those who wish to vote are registered in their home member state. As I said in my opening remarks, we expect that many will have done that, but there is the opportunity, if they wish to vote in the UK should we hold these potential elections, for them to do so by filling in a UC1 form.

The hon. Lady spoke about the deal, and I gently remind her that we are potentially fighting these elections because, when Labour Members had the chance to vote for a withdrawal agreement that fits their own party policy, they decided to play politics rather than deliver on the referendum.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council.

When voters in Kettering voted 61% to leave the European Union in the referendum three years ago, they did not expect to be asked to vote in European elections this year, and they find it ridiculous that they are being asked to do so. Fortunately, we have an excellent electoral services team at Kettering Borough Council. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will reimburse all the extra costs that councils will bear in arranging these elections?

Brandon Lewis: Obviously, I share my hon. Friend's view that nobody who voted in 2016, on either side of the debate, ever expected to vote in a European election again once they saw that result. I still hope there is an opportunity for them not to have to do so. As I say, I am disappointed that we are in this position at all, but these elections will follow the process that has been used previously—as they did in 2014; all the same processes will apply.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am delighted to confirm that the Scottish National party is looking forward to the upcoming European elections, as an opportunity to demonstrate Scotland's opposition to Brexit and our commitment to the visions and ideals of the European Union, particularly the protection of the rights of its citizens. It is therefore concerning to hear that a lack of Government planning means that many EU citizens may be unable to register to vote in these elections.

Of course there was quite a mix-up back in 2014 in this regard, meaning that up to half a million EU citizens were prevented from voting, and the Electoral Commission was supposed to have had that sorted out in advance of any further European elections. Given what EU citizens have been put through in the past few years, it is particularly concerning that their voice may not be heard in these elections. It is all very well for the Minister to suggest that they should go home to vote, but, as has been pointed by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), whom I congratulate on securing this urgent question, many of the registers are already closed in other European Union countries, because, unlike ours, their Governments were organised.

May I therefore echo some of the requests made by others and ask, in particular, that the deadline for registration be extended? May I also ask the Minister not to shuffle responsibility off on to the Electoral Commission, but to take Government responsibility for what has happened here and to make sure that the Electoral Commission is indeed writing to all local electoral registration officers and monitoring their compliance with the reminder to send out these forms?

Finally, given that we are in this mess because of the way the Government have handled the Brexit process, will the Minister take some Government responsibility for an information campaign aimed at EU citizens to make sure that they are registered to vote—or are the Government afraid of what these people will vote for if they are registered?

Brandon Lewis: I must say to the hon. and learned Lady that I do not accept the premise of some of her points—in fact, I think they are based on an entirely false premise. First, what she said I said is not what I said. In answer to her final point, which links to that, let me say that over the past year the Government, and indeed the Electoral Commission, have been advising EU residents to register in their member state. That is not the same thing as saying, “Go home and vote.” However, it does fulfil her last request, as we have been advising EU citizens—understandably, as we did not expect to be fighting these elections—that if they wish to exercise their vote, they should register in their home member state, because that is where there would be a European election.

Of course, if the honourable looks back in *Hansard* later, she will see that in my opening remarks I outlined that the Electoral Commission is in contact, and has been in consistent contact, with electoral registration officers about the processes to make sure that things are in place.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): There is of course a really easy solution to all this, isn't there, Minister? Let's just stop mucking about and call the whole thing off.

Brandon Lewis: As my hon. Friend knows well, I often agree with and enjoy his direct, cutting-through remarks, which he has just demonstrated again on the Floor of the House, getting to the core point in such a simple way. I entirely agree with what he said, and I hope that we have a chance for this House to express the will it should have expressed on 29 March, which is to approve the withdrawal agreement, leave the EU and deliver on the referendum result.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Government have a responsibility to encourage the widest possible participation in the European Parliament elections, but the impression they are giving to EU citizens, “Please do not vote here, vote back home.” is doing the opposite and is, frankly, insulting to many of them who regard the UK as their home. The Minister will be aware that some electoral registration officers have sent out reminder letters and UC1 forms to EU citizens. Is it the Government's policy that all EROs should do so, and should do so immediately?

Brandon Lewis: Let me correct something that the right hon. Gentleman said. I have huge respect for him and for his role. The point I have been making about EU citizens voting in their home member states is that because we were not looking to fight European elections as we wanted to leave the EU, the Government's advice over the past year for people who wished to use their vote had been to register in their home state, because that would be the only place where there would be a European election in which they could vote. There is obviously now the potential that we will fight European elections, which is why, as I outlined in my opening remarks, the Electoral Commission has advised the electoral registration officers to identify all EU citizens who have the right to vote and notify them that they can vote in this country. If they complete a UC1, they will be able to register to vote and then vote in the European elections, should we hold them, although obviously as a Government we would rather not hold them.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am fortunate to represent a constituency with at least 7,000 EU citizens, so this issue is particularly important for me. We should continue to communicate on the process. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the registration process is exactly the same as it was last time and that to suggest that there has been some kind of change is more likely to cause confusion than clarity?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I give credit to Opposition Members and am absolutely sure that they are not trying purposely to confuse people, but the processes are exactly the same as they were in 2014 and, as I said, go back to the 2001 regulations.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this urgent question.

I am bound to place on the record the fact that I have profound concerns about the elections, which I hope do take place, and suspect strongly that there will be many legal challenges. I say gently to the Minister that the reason why we are holding them is that the Government have failed to deliver on the referendum result, and I remind him that it is a good job the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) is not present, because if he were here, he might want to remind the

Minister about his elderly parents, who were born in Italy and have lived and contributed here, like many hundreds of thousands of EU citizens. This is their home, and the idea that to exercise their democratic right they should go back to Italy is absolutely outrageous.

I am worried about the rights of European citizens to vote, but I am also worried about their rights to stand. I was going to raise this issue as a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, on the day that the nominations closed in the south-west and Gibraltar—for the rest of the United Kingdom the deadline is 4 o'clock today—I discovered that the Electoral Commission had failed to supply to the returning officers the necessary information for them to provide to an EU citizen who wishes to stand, as they lawfully can, as a candidate in the elections. I am grateful to the returning officers in Kettering, who were so helpful; to the Spanish and Romanian ambassadors, who intervened directly; and to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who intervened directly to provide the material, guidance and advice to the returning officers directly from the Cabinet Office, because the Electoral Commission had failed to do it.

As I stand here today, I cannot say whether two Change UK candidates, one Spanish born and one Romanian born, will be able to stand in the elections, through no fault of their own. Will the Minister please assure the House that any EU citizen who wishes to stand and who satisfies the legal requirements will not be and has not been prevented from standing in the elections?

Brandon Lewis: Let me deal with a couple of the points raised by the right hon. Lady. I reiterate that I personally believe in democracy and think that everybody who is in this country at any election, be it local, European or parliamentary, should look to exercise their right to vote. Many people have given a great deal over decades to have that right to vote, which is why it is important that we are clear with people that, should they complete that UC1 form, they will be able to vote, exactly as in 2014 and previous European elections. My point about people voting in their home member state is that that is what many EU citizens will have already arranged to do, on the understanding that there were not going to be elections in this country.

Where I disagree with the right hon. Lady quite dramatically is that I think this House should be supporting the decision made in the 2016 referendum, voting for the withdrawal agreement and not holding the elections—

Anna Soubry: Answer my question.

Brandon Lewis: I am answering the right hon. Lady's questions. She asked several and I have just covered some of them.

On her final question about EU citizens who wish to stand as candidates in the elections, the rules concerning EU citizens who wish to stand in this country in the European elections in May are the same as they were for the previous election in 2014. There are no changes. The Electoral Commission has provided guidance for candidates on this matter—

Anna Soubry: No it has not.

Brandon Lewis: My understanding from the Electoral Commission is that it has. I hear the right hon. Lady saying that it has not; I will look into that straight after

this urgent question and make sure that somebody in the Cabinet Office, or myself, comes back to her directly during the course of today.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My constituency is home to thousands of EU citizens. They deserve the right to vote here and every effort should be made to ensure that they can do so. Given the Government's Brexit shambles, will the Minister now commit to doing one of several things: extending the deadline, but also ensuring that photocopied or scanned documentation will be accepted when people register?

Brandon Lewis: As I have said at the Dispatch Box a few times, I agree that everybody who is entitled to vote should be encouraged to exercise their vote, which is a treasured and valued thing. I have put a copy of the UC1 form in the Library today, as I have outlined, so Members can see it. It is a very short and simple form to fill in, people have plenty of time to do just that, and I am sure that the Electoral Commission will look at the options that the hon. Lady has outlined.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Minister's answers this morning can hardly be seen as a reassurance that the Government value EU citizens living in this country or respect their rights. The Government should do their utmost to make good on their promises to respect EU citizens' rights, so will the Minister please confirm that, for every EU citizen registered to vote in UK local elections, the obligation to send out the additional form for EU elections rests with the Government? This mess lies clearly at the Government's door, not that of local government officials.

Brandon Lewis: As I said earlier, the UC1 form is there for anybody to complete and send in. It is on the website, it takes about 30 seconds to complete—or maybe a minute, for anybody whose handwriting is as slow as mine—and I hope that as many EU citizens as possible who are able to vote in this country take advantage of that opportunity and use their vote, if we have the elections.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): European Union citizens make a huge contribution to our public services, our economy, our communities and our country, and to my city of Newcastle. I hope that the Minister recognises that and recognises that they have suffered immensely through the Brexit process, not being able to vote in the first place and facing a rise in hate crime and continued uncertainty about their status and that of loved ones. Does he not think that he should go the extra mile to facilitate their voting and that not doing so adds insult to injury and reflects a lack of flexibility of responsiveness, which is the reason why we are in this mess in the first place?

Brandon Lewis: The reason we are in this position is that on 29 March too many Members of Parliament did not vote to leave the European Union. However, I agree with the hon. Lady that EU citizens play a hugely important part in our economy, culture and society. That is why it is important that the Government and the Prime Minister have been clear from the very beginning that we want to protect and secure the rights of EU citizens in the UK. They are a hugely important part of

[*Brandon Lewis*]

our economy and I hope that as many as possible who wish to do so take advantage of the opportunity to vote in the elections, should we hold them. However, I still hold to the point that my main aim is to ensure that we do not have those elections in the first place and that we honour the referendum result.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is deeply depressing to have to reassure EU nationals who come to my surgeries that they are welcome here and that we want to keep them here. It should not be my job to do that, and it is really depressing that people feel so unwelcome, having lived here, worked here and contributed so much for years. The rhetoric sounds reassuring, but the bureaucratic restrictions that the Minister is imposing on EU nationals paint a different picture, so why do we not dispense with this trifling inconvenience and just reassure people that they can vote through the normal process that other British citizens use?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman talks about the normal process. I would point out again that the process is exactly the same as in 2014 and flows from the 2001 regulations. That is how European elections are run, as I outlined in my opening remarks. I hope that European citizens will take the opportunity to look at a UC1 form and, if we hold these elections, register to vote.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The SNP has an EU citizen standing for the European Parliament, Christian Allard, who I am pretty sure considers this place to be his home. He will be voting in the elections, I will be voting for him and I look forward to him taking his seat in the European Parliament. The Minister keeps saying that if this House had voted for the withdrawal agreement, the elections would not be taking place. If EU nationals had had a vote in a referendum, perhaps they would still be taking place. In the contingency planning that the Cabinet ought to be doing for a second EU referendum, will the Government be considering extending the right to vote to EU nationals?

Brandon Lewis: The Government's focus is on doing all we can to ensure that we deliver on and respect the EU referendum—the referendum that we have already had. Parliamentarians should respect and deliver on that before they start talking about any others.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Will the Minister actually answer the question posed by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone)—that is, if local authorities have to spend more money because of the late notice of the elections going ahead due to the shambles on the Conservative side of this Parliament, will they receive that money back from central Government?

Brandon Lewis: I thought that I had answered the question by making the point that local elections, European elections and general elections follow the same process of financing. Of course, at this stage, we do not actually even know what the full cost of those elections will be; we will not know until afterwards. At this stage, we do not even know exactly how many nominations there will be. We will be liaising with electoral returning officers through the Electoral Commission, as we always do with elections. Given the hon. Lady's remarks, let me say again that we are in this place because on 29 March she and too many colleagues did not vote to leave the EU and avoid these elections.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): Telling EU citizens to go home and vote is an absolute insult. This is their home and none of this shambles is any of their making. Will the Minister give an assurance that no EU citizens who turns up to vote will be turned away as a result of this shambles? Why can these forms and paperwork not be available at the point where they vote?

Brandon Lewis: Nobody is saying to EU citizens what the hon. Lady has just said we are saying. What we are saying is that EU citizens, as per 2014, should follow the process to register to vote so that they can use their vote if we hold these elections. It is about ensuring that people vote once in the European parliamentary elections, if they are held.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the Minister ensure that non-digital platforms are also utilised as part of any publicity drive, which he referred to in his opening remarks, to ensure that voters who do not have access to the internet or adequate broadband are fully informed of the process they need to complete ahead of the deadline?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. The Electoral Commission looks at all these things, but I will ensure that it is specifically aware of that matter.

Government Mandate for the NHS

12.1 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the Government's failure to lay before Parliament the NHS mandate for the current financial year.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I am grateful to have the opportunity to set out the Government's approach to setting a mandate for NHS England for 2019-20. The Government's annual mandate to NHS England for 2019-20 will, for the first time, be a joint document with the annual NHS Improvement remit letter, called an accountability framework. This signals the importance of these two arm's-length bodies working increasingly closely to maximise their collective impact. It will set one-year transitional objectives to allow the NHS time to implement the long-term plan, and it has been developed to meet the needs of patients, families and staff.

We are committed to the NHS and are funding its long-term plan to ensure that it is fit for the future for patients, their families and NHS staff. The accountability framework sets the expectations that will make that long-term plan a reality. The Government have continued to prioritise funding the NHS, with a five-year budget settlement for the NHS announced in summer 2018 that will see the NHS budget rise by £33.9 billion a year by 2023-24.

The funding settlement and the implementation of the long-term plan are not affected in any way by the short delay in the publication of the accountability framework. We are all engaged to ensure that the accountability framework is published and laid as soon as possible, and I and my ministerial colleagues and officials are working closely with NHS England and Healthwatch England, as statutory consultees, to ensure accountability, improvement and progress to deliver world-class care for patients.

Jonathan Ashworth: It is a pleasure to see the Minister of State, as always, but the Secretary of State should be here to defend his failure to produce the NHS mandate. In every previous year, in accordance with section 23 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012—an Act that he supported and voted for despite everyone telling the Government not to support it—the Government have published the NHS mandate before the beginning of the financial year. This mandate outlines the Secretary of State's priorities for the NHS given the financial settlement, yet this is the first time a Secretary of State has failed to lay before Parliament the Government's mandate to the NHS for the forthcoming financial year. Is this a failure of leadership or the latest piece of stealth dismantling of the Health and Social Care Act? If it is the latter, why not just take our advice and bin the whole thing and so end the wasteful contracting, tendering and marketisation it ushered in?

The Minister talks of the 10-year long-term plan, but it is no good his telling us he endorses Simon Steven's vision of the NHS in a decade's time, when Ministers cannot even tell us what they expect the NHS to achieve in a year's time. He boasts of the new revenue funding settlement for the NHS but seemingly has not got a clue

what he wants the NHS to spend it on in the next 12 months, and at the same time he does not talk about the cuts to public health budgets, training budgets and capital investment.

Will the new accountability framework deliver for patients in the next 12 months? Last year's mandate pledged that A&E aggregate performance in England would hit 95% in 2018. That pledge was broken, so can the Minister tell us whether, for those A&E departments not trialling the new access standard, the four-hour A&E standard will be met this year, or will the target not be met for the fourth year running?

Or how about the 18-week referral to treatment target? More than half a million people are now waiting more than 18 weeks for treatment. The target that 92% of people on the waiting list should be waiting less than 18 weeks has not been met since 2016. Will that target be met in the next 12 months, or has it also been abandoned? What about cancer waits? Some 28,000 patients are now waiting beyond two months for treatment. The target for 85% of cancer patients to be seen within two months for their first cancer treatment after an urgent referral has been missed in every month but one since April 2014. Will that target be met this year, or will cancer patients be expected to wait longer and longer?

On staffing and pay, will funding be made available in the next 12 months, as it was last year, for a pay rise for health staff employed on agenda for change terms and conditions working in the public health sector for local authorities and social enterprises?

We have no NHS mandate, even though it is mandatory. We have no social care Green Paper, even though it has been promised five times. The big issue has been ducked again. We have no workforce plan, even though we have 100,000 vacancies across the NHS, and the interim plan, which should have been published today, has been delayed again. The Secretary of State parades his leadership credentials around right-wing think-tanks, yet on this record he could not run a wheel stall, never mind the Tory party. It is clearer than ever that only Labour will fully fund our NHS and deliver the quality of care patients deserve.

Stephen Hammond: Anyone listening to that will have realised that the hon. Gentleman is more concerned with political points scoring and process than with the substance and funding of the NHS. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) shouts at me, but she will want to remember that the shadow Secretary of State welcomed the long-term plan—or much of it—back in January.

It is absolutely clear—evidence was provided to the Public Accounts Select Committee yesterday by the permanent secretary and the chief executive of NHS England—that while obviously it would be better to publish by the deadline, it is more important that the mandate be right than published on a particular day. It is more important that we get this document on the long-term strategy of the NHS correct. As Simon Stevens, the chief executive of the NHS, said, there is no problem with this short delay to the mandate. It is an important document, but it is causing him no problems. It is causing no problems.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned access to treatment and treatment times. This winter, more than 7 million patients were seen in under four hours. That is an

[Stephen Hammond]

increase of nearly 6% in attendances. I would have hoped that the Opposition Front Bench might have praised the NHS and its hard-working staff—

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Always do. I worked in it for 17 years.

Stephen Hammond: Rather than shouting political points across the Dispatch Box.

The hon. Gentleman says there are no targets. He is of course wrong.

Jonathan Ashworth: I said you were not meeting them.

Stephen Hammond: No, the hon. Gentleman said there were no targets likely to be set for the NHS this year. The accountability framework will include detailed and specific annual deliverables and set out in detail a process for delivering future implementation as well as some of the early delivery goals for 2019-20. He is wrong therefore to say that the framework will not have deliverables attached to it. It will. He also mentioned the Green Paper—

Jonathan Ashworth: Where is it?

Stephen Hammond: I have said, as the hon. Gentleman has heard many times, that we are finalising that. Again, it is more important to get it right. On the long-term plan for workforce implementation, a draft plan is being produced and I expect that plan to be published in the very near future—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The shadow Secretary of State exceeded his time on his feet. He must not now chunter in borderline delinquent fashion from his seat.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): He's too old to be a delinquent.

Mr Speaker: No one is ever too old to behave in a delinquent fashion.

Stephen Hammond: There are all sorts of lines I could follow that with, Mr Speaker.

It is clear that it is this side of the House that is putting in the funding to make sure that the NHS can deliver for the patients, staff and families.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Most of us will remember that the NHS Confederation said four years ago that it wanted

“a manageable number of objectives, which...focus on long-term outcomes for patients and populations rather than measures of how services are delivered”—

and—

“encourage collective responsibility for patient outcomes rather than silo working – particularly the expected outcomes from integrated care”.

Most people in the NHS will welcome the short delay if the result is that it makes it more possible for them to achieve the objective of the NHS, which is serving patients together.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend will have noted, as I said in my opening remarks, that this is an accountability framework because it brings together both the mandate for NHS England and the remit letter to NHS Improvement. It is a sign of more collaborative working which, as he says, almost everybody in the NHS and the healthcare arena would welcome.

Ms Eagle: The Minister will know the funding pressures that the NHS has been under, despite the 10-year plan: we still await the actual money being delivered, even though it has been announced. In the Wirral, a great deal of inefficiency is caused by the chronic underfunding of social care, for which the Government are responsible, which puts enormous pressure on health services. When it finally arrives, will the plan for the next year offer some proper relief in that area?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady will know that the Government have committed £33.9 billion up to 2023-24, and the first element of that has arrived this year. There will be, as I said earlier, publication of a Green Paper on social care and, combined with the comprehensive spending review, that will ensure that the Government will provide for the social care funding that is necessary.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Minister recognise that the commitment under the long-term plan to ambulatory care, which is supported by the Royal College of Physicians, is helping patients receive the best form of care service in their own homes?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. At the heart of the long-term plan is the emphasis on primary care and prevention. Providing care for people in their own homes undoubtedly achieves better outcomes for patients and he is right to welcome it.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The Minister will know that NHS England is currently consulting on proposals to change the law to remove mandatory competition, but billions of pounds' worth of NHS services are currently out to tender. Has he considered, as part of the mandate, issuing clear guidance to CCGs that while the consultation is taking place they do not need to put many services out to the market? Or is he happy for that privatisation to continue on his watch?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that a consultation is being undertaken on various aspects of the long-term plan and the legal framework that needs to be put in place. It is entirely up to local CCGs to make decisions on their procurement policy.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Record investment is going into Kettering General Hospital and a record number of patients are being treated, but the best way that the Minister can deliver the NHS mandate and long-term plan for the people of Kettering is by providing the funding for a new urgent care hub, the site of which he has visited at Kettering General Hospital, and by working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to take advantage of local government reorganisation in Northamptonshire to create a health and social care pilot. Will he commit to both?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend and I have sometimes disagreed on certain things, but one thing we agree on is his advocacy for his constituents, and he is right that I have been to see for myself the issues in Kettering in terms of the current configuration of the accident and emergency department. He is right to press for that urgent care centre, and he knows that he has impressed the case on my mind.

Mr Speaker: Everybody in Kettering must be aware of the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone). It is beyond my vivid imagination to suppose that there is any resident of the area who is not aware of him.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): The truth is that it is very difficult for the NHS to make plans without knowing what the Government's plans are for social care. We know, following a response to a question in yesterday's debate, that the Green Paper has actually been written. There is simply no excuse for the continued delay in its publication which would allow the House to scrutinise it and the NHS to be able to provide a truly integrated approach to health and social care. Just saying that it will be published soon is no longer acceptable. Will the Minister set out when we can expect to see this vital document, so that we can scrutinise the Government's plans?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady knows that the House and her Committee will have the fullest opportunity to scrutinise the document as and when it is published. She also knows that there is a commitment to publish it soon. She also rightly points out that it will deliver on the need to ensure that health and social care are integrated.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): For most of my professional life, I was an NHS planner. I assure the Minister that the great expectation and anticipation of NHS planners for planning guidance in the mandate is very real. They are public servants who expect to be held accountable and do what the Government ask them to do. It is unacceptable to leave them in the dark. It is an insult to patients—taxpayers who pay for services and expect to know what they can receive locally. The delay is inexcusable.

The Minister says he has a plan and the Government say they have the money, so why cannot they publish it? What are they trying to hide?

Stephen Hammond: The Government are not trying to hide anything. The hon. Lady is right that it is an important document, and it is important therefore that we get it absolutely correct. I refer her to what the chief executive of NHS England said yesterday. He said:

"We have an agreed direction in the long-term plan... We have the budget set for the next year, and we have the NHS annual planning process... wrapped up... 2019-20 is... a transition year... stepping into the new five-year long-term plan."

The chief executive of the NHS thinks that the process is working acceptably.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am really not following the Minister on why this mandate has not been published. I wonder whether it is because of the paralysis in Government caused by the Brexit shambles or because, as the *Health Service Journal* reports, the Secretary of State is focused on an anticipated leadership race and his thoughts are elsewhere.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady does a great injustice to my right hon. Friend. He is today—

Paula Sherriff: Writing his speech for the leadership!

Stephen Hammond: In the hon. Lady's fantasy world, that may be true, but my right hon. Friend is in fact addressing a conference in Manchester, talking about the gender pay gap and how this side will close it in the NHS. I would have thought she would welcome that, rather than shouting at me.

Dr Wollaston: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When the Secretary of State comes to the Dispatch Box and makes a clear commitment that the publication date of the Green Paper will be before Christmas, and we know that the document has been written, what are the consequences of an absolute failure to honour such a commitment made at the Dispatch Box by a Secretary of State?

Mr Speaker: The consequences are political more than anything else. Quite what form that political consequence takes, if there is to be any, very much depends upon the view of the House of Commons; so the matter is the property of the House. I do not wish to incite strong feeling on this matter and the Minister has answered questions fully—whether to the hon. Lady's satisfaction or not is another matter—and courteously. There are proceedings that can be brought to the House, but those are rarely brought and they would require a written communication with me. If, for example, a Member thought that the behaviour were contemptuous of the House, it is perfectly proper to bring that to my attention and I would have to consider it very carefully. But my instinctive reaction is that the consequence is a political consequence in terms of what might be considered a negative opinion of the failure to honour an earlier commitment. We shall leave it there for now.

Business of the House

12.20 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 29 April will be:

MONDAY 29 APRIL—A motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Chemical Weapons (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 618), followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Zimbabwe (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 604), followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Republic of Belarus (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 600), followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 792), followed by a motion relating to the membership of the Intelligence and Security Committee.

TUESDAY 30 APRIL—Second Reading of the National Insurance Contributions (Termination Payments and Sporting Testimonials) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 1 MAY—Opposition day (19th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 2 MAY—A general debate on World Immunisation Week.

FRIDAY 3 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

I welcome all staff and Members of this House back to Parliament after Easter. First, I want to echo the sentiment expressed yesterday at Prime Minister's questions by paying tribute to Lyra McKee. We send our deepest sympathies to her friends and family, and in this House we will always stand against those who committed such a horrendous act.

The whole House was shocked and appalled at the attacks on three Christian churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. We send our deepest condolences to all those who have lost loved ones and who have been affected by that atrocity.

This month is Bowel Cancer Awareness Month, a valuable opportunity to raise funds and awareness for the millions of people who are affected by this terrible disease, and to help ensure a future when nobody needs to die of bowel cancer.

Finally, I wish all those standing in next week's local elections all the best for the final week of campaigning. We should continue to encourage anyone with an interest in serving their community to stand for election, we should do everything to encourage anyone with an interest in serving their community to stand for election, and we should do everything possible to protect our democracy from unacceptable abuse and intimidation.

I finish by paying tribute to all those who are willing to put themselves forward for public service.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business, and for our second Opposition day. We ask for one and two come along—a bit like buses, which is quite interesting because the Labour party

is announcing £1.3 billion-worth of investment to reverse the Government cuts to 3,000 bus routes. That is a lifeline to our pensioners.

It was the Prime Minister herself who announced a two-year parliamentary Session, in mid-June 2017, just after the election. We know that there is not a fixed length of time for Sessions, and that it is usual for the first Session after an election to go to 18 months, but there is correspondence circulating—I say circulating, rather than leaked—which shows that, as I understand it, Whitehall has been told to work towards a new parliamentary Session starting in or around June 2019. What is the Government line on when this Session will end and the new one will begin, because important Bills—the Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill—all need their Report stage?

I have previously raised at business questions the issue of the 17,000 British students who had planned to study in Europe under Erasmus+ from September. The Leader of the House did not respond to that query, so our young people need to know whether their funding is secured. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or for Exiting the European Union—I do not mind which—ensuring that that funding is guaranteed? That is why we need a Queen's Speech.

In our Queen's Speech, we would deal with the climate emergency. It was a Labour Government who passed the world's first Climate Change Act in 2008, and we are the leading country working to achieve the agreements from Kyoto. The Government's response so far is to expand Heathrow airport and facilitate fracking, and they have a 25-year environment plan—and no statement on a scrappage scheme for diesel cars. By the end of that plan, Greta, who spoke so movingly to all of us, will be 41 years old. I do not think that is what she had in mind when she spoke of the climate emergency.

We need a Queen's Speech because we need to stop the Department for Work and Pensions' failing system of assessments. I ask this again, following the tragic death of Stephen Smith, who had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, osteoarthritis and an enlarged prostate that left him in chronic pain, but was deemed fit to work by the DWP. No one should be fighting the DWP from their sickbed.

The Leader of the House is right: our democracy is under threat. At the first meeting of the new Sub-Committee on Disinformation, the Information Commissioner said that she was "surprised and disappointed" by the lack of space given to the regulation of online political campaigns in the Government's recent Online Harms White Paper, saying that there should be more focus on what she called a "huge societal harm". The Information Commissioner said that a million people clicked on Facebook adverts paid for by Mainstream Network, with an unknown number going on to email their MP to urge them to reject the Prime Minister's plans for a Brexit deal. The emails of over a million people who responded to that campaign for a hard Brexit may have been collected.

If we cannot have a Queen's Speech, could we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on how the Government will regulate online political campaigns? Otherwise, we are in danger of electing a comedian, as they have done in Ukraine.

More important, could we have a debate on early-day motion 2309 on Donald Trump's proposed state visit, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)?

[That this House deplores the record of US President Donald Trump, including his misogyny, racism and xenophobia; condemns his previous comments on women, refugees and torture; further condemns his lack of action on climate change and failure to support the Paris Climate Change Deal; further deplores his sharing of online content related to a far-right extremist organisation in the UK; deprecates his comments about the Mayor of London; notes previous motions and debates in the House including on the withholding of the honour of a joint address to the Houses of Parliament; further notes the historical significance and honour that comes with the choice to offer a full state visit to an individual; and calls on the Prime Minister and the Government to rescind the advice to offer a full state visit to President Trump.]

The President, who is entitled to come here on any other visit but not in our name, has spearheaded a dangerous policy of separating migrant children from their families and of banning Muslims from the USA; suggested today that GCHQ spied on his election campaign; referred to nations as “Sh**hole countries”; and called news outlets “fake news” in an attempt to limit the freedom of the press. The report by the Special Counsel says that he has obstructed justice. At least the EDM was transparent and not redacted.

Will the Leader of the House look into something that a colleague has raised and issue some guidance for what colleagues do outside each other's houses? They should not be tweeting outside people's homes; that is not acceptable to their families. I will give her the name of the hon. Member later.

Whether it is 359 people, including 48 children, or Lyra McKee, life has needlessly been taken away. As Lyra's family have said:

“Lyra's answer would have been simple, the only way to overcome hatred and intolerance is with love, understanding and kindness.”

Murdered on Holy Thursday, she will forever be linked to peace and the Good Friday agreement.

Our thoughts are with the families in Sri Lanka who have been destroyed forever by these events: innocent people enjoying their lives or—as Lyra was—a journalist doing her work. It is our duty and our responsibility to them, as Father Magill said, to work for peace.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the shadow Leader of the House for her remarks about Lyra McKee. It was a fitting tribute that all Members would agree with.

The hon. Lady asked when this parliamentary Session will end. As ever, it is subject to the progress of parliamentary business, and an announcement will be made in the usual way at the appropriate moment.

The hon. learned asked about Erasmus+. She will be aware that, while we remain a member of the European Union, students will continue to be part of the Erasmus arrangements. Under the withdrawal agreement and future economic partnership with the EU, new arrangements will be put in place, but it is this Government's ambition to seize many new opportunities for young people to study overseas and form links around the world. We have Education questions on Monday 29 April, and she may wish to raise her specific question then.

The hon. Lady asked about climate change and the climate crisis. I would like to pay tribute to all those who have done so much to peacefully share their views about the importance of addressing climate change. She will be aware that it was this Government who ratified the Paris agreement in November 2016. I was proud to be part of that team when I was Energy Minister at the Department of Energy and Climate Change. It was the first truly global legally binding agreement to tackle climate change, and I know that all Members support it.

In the UK, we have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 25% since 2010, and UK carbon dioxide emissions have fallen for six years in a row—the longest streak on record. The hon. Lady is right to mention our 25-year environment plan, which pledges to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste. I banned plastic microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products. It is important that we do everything we can to protect our marine environment. Air pollution has also been reduced significantly since 2010, and we have put in place a clean air strategy and a clean growth strategy, both of which aim to ensure that we lead the world in decarbonisation—something that matters a great deal to all of us.

The hon. Lady raised the tragic case of Stephen Smith. I have seen on social media that his was a most appalling situation. I am not aware of the exact circumstances surrounding his tragic death, but it was a very harrowing story. The Government spend £55 billion a year to support disabled people and people with health conditions, which is up £10 billion in real terms since 2010, and we do everything in our power to ensure that we prioritise the wellbeing of people with disabilities.

The hon. Lady also asked about online harms and in particular what we can do to ensure proper protection of people's data and protection from the abuse that we see all too often. She will be aware that the Online Harms White Paper sets out our plans for world-leading legislation to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online, overseen by an independent regulator, and we will make a further announcement on that in due course.

Finally, the hon. Lady mentioned the state visit from the President of the United States. All Members will be aware that the UK has a special and enduring relationship with the United States, based on our long history and commitment to shared values. The upcoming visit will be an opportunity to strengthen our already close relationship—one based on a frank exchange of views and, where we disagree, making our disagreements frankly known. It will also be an opportunity to discuss how we can build on our close ties with the United States in the years ahead.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I chair the all-party parliamentary group on building communities, and on Tuesday we launched our inquiry into how we can build not only more housing units in this country but the infrastructure to make homes fit to live in, so that we build communities rather than just empty shells. May we have a debate in Government time on how to change this country's infrastructure to encourage the building of communities, rather than just putting up houses that are soulless and that people do not want to live in?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We are trying not only to build houses—that is a top domestic priority for the Government, to

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

ensure that everybody has a safe and secure home of their own—but to ensure that they are in proper communities with the right level of infrastructure. I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall or Backbench debate, so that all Members can share their experiences and views.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and I echo the tributes to Lyra McKee and the victims of the appalling slaughter in Sri Lanka.

It is good to be back, but it almost feels as though we have not been away at all. We have still not left the EU, surprise, surprise. The Prime Minister is still in office—just—and we are still all looking forward to the European elections, which I know Government Members are looking forward to as much as we in Scotland are looking forward to Prime Minister Boris. Can we have a debate on why the good citizens of the United Kingdom should get out there and exercise their right to vote in those crucial elections? There is such a variety of choice. They could choose, like 40% of Conservative councillors, to vote for the Farage vanity party or the Kippers. They could vote for leave Labour or remain Labour, or some combination of the two. And then there are the Change UK TIGgers. The wonderful thing about them is that, thankfully, they are the only ones. Can we have a debate about that, to get some excitement into the European elections?

The only item of business that the Government want is another shot at their thrice-defeated withdrawal agreement. According to our friends in the press, that might happen as soon as next week. Apparently, the talks with Labour are going both disastrously and really well, according to who we speak to and what time of the day it is. Can the Leader of the House furnish us with her thinking on the withdrawal agreement, when we might expect to see it back and whether it meets the strictures laid down by you, Mr Speaker?

Lastly, we on the SNP Benches might not be sticking around here for much longer. Scotland is looking at this Brexit freak show and increasingly saying, “Naw, no thank you.” Imagine being in Scotland and thinking that the isolating ugliness of this disastrous Brexit is the best that Scotland could ever be or aspire to. That is why there will be another referendum on our independence, and Scotland will be saying, “It’s been good to know you, but we think we’ll manage on our own, thank you very much.”

Andrea Leadsom: Well, obviously, we would miss our resident rock star, should the hon. Gentleman choose to leave us, but I can safely say that we will not miss his terrible jokes. As for him saying that the TIGgers are the only ones, I do not think that that is their aspiration. They hope to grow in number, and I am not sure whether he wishes them success or disaster; we will see.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the European elections. He will be aware that the Commons rejection of the withdrawal agreement on 29 March is the reason why we now face European elections. We in the Government have explored every avenue to find ways to avoid fighting the European parliamentary elections. After all, a majority of people in the United Kingdom chose to leave the

European Union. It is absolutely unacceptable that, three years on, we face the need to fight European elections because this House has not found it in its heart to allow us to fulfil the will of the people. That is a great shame, and I am personally extremely upset about it. It is vital that we bring in the withdrawal agreement Bill, to give the House the opportunity to make progress on delivering on the will of the people.

Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman, as he so often does, shows his determination to ignore the result of not only the referendum of 2016 but the referendum of 2014. His party is determined to ask people the question again because it did not like the answer, and that is not the way for a proper democracy in the western world to go about its business.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. A further 33 Members are seeking to catch my eye, and as colleagues know, it is my usual practice to seek to accommodate everybody. However, I have a responsibility to protect the Backbench Business Committee debates as well, and I must advise the House that the first of those two debates, on school funding, has no fewer than 23 would-be contributors. I cannot guarantee that everybody will be called, and there is a premium upon extreme brevity from now on.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on clinical commissioning groups restricting access to treatments formally approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NHS England and other health authorities? I was shocked to learn that Southend CCG is restricting cataract, hernia and knee and hip replacement operations by putting them on a list of procedures of limited proven value.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sorry to hear of this situation, but as my hon. Friend will know, blanket restrictions on effective treatments are unacceptable. NHS England should take action if there is evidence of rationing of care, and if the CCG is breaching its statutory responsibility to provide services to the local population. He may like to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise this matter directly with a Health Minister.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the brave firefighters and emergency workers who have been dealing with the fires on Ilkley moor and other moors nearby? They are overstretched, and working hard in extremely difficult conditions to bring these damaging and dangerous fires under control. May we have a debate on properly funding our fire services and, crucially, on the importance of informing the public about fire prevention?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Lady in thanking and paying tribute to all those firefighters working so hard to put out wildfires, which are a problem right across the UK. She is right that we should do everything possible to ensure the public are aware of the risk of these wildfires, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On 11 April, the statutory instrument was tabled to extend the period before we leave the European Union to 31 October, and it was rushed through this House during the afternoon

following the Council meeting attended by the Prime Minister. Eighty Members of Parliament have signed my prayer for the annulment of that statutory instrument, which we regard as ultra vires and void. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that there is very soon a debate on that statutory instrument and, naturally, on the issues at stake? We believe that that debate should be held on the Floor of the House.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will be aware that rejecting this SI would not change exit day as set out in international law, but instead create legal chaos as our domestic statute book would not reflect our current status with the EU. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend has made representations for a debate on this subject, and I am pleased to be able to tell him that I will be able to grant a debate on this statutory instrument in due course.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I, too, welcome the return of Opposition days to the Order Paper, although it would be even more welcome if the Government started to pay some heed to what the House says on these occasions. However, may I say to the Leader of the House that there is now a multiplicity of voices on the Opposition Benches? We have a Member of Parliament elected to represent the interests of the Green party; we have a number of non-aligned Members of Parliament; and the Independent Group is now constituted formally as a political party. In the interests of all voices being heard, the Independent Group Members in particular should be entitled to time, and I very much look forward to pursuing matters of common interest to my party and theirs if they were to get it.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point, which I will take away and consider carefully. I am grateful to him for raising this point. This gives me an opportunity to raise one other issue he mentioned, which is whether the Government choose to vote on any Opposition day. Hon. Members will be aware that that is decided on a case-by-case basis, and they will also be aware that Standing Orders are very clear that there is no requirement on any Member of Parliament to vote on any motion.

What I can inform the House of—this may be of help to the House—is my response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee's recent report on resolutions of the House of Commons. I have set out a motion under which, if an Opposition party motion is approved by the House, the relevant Minister will respond to that resolution of the House by making a statement no more than 12 weeks after the debate. I have now shortened that to eight weeks after the debate, which I hope will give Members the opportunity to hear a faster statement by the Government on what action we plan to take, while still allowing proper time for consideration of the resolution passed by the House.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): When the French potentate Napoleon described our kingdom as “a nation of shopkeepers”, doubtless he had in mind the panoply of family grocers, butchers and bakers that once populated almost every part of our isles. Now, sadly, they are too often replaced by monolithic superstores or identikit high streets dominated by a handful of soulless supermarkets. Given that the Competition and Markets Authority has today ruled

out the amalgamation of two of these greedy giants, will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in this House on how the Government can stand up for the independent, family-run small businesses that our constituents enjoy, and against the cold-hearted, capricious corporate conglomerates that crush competition and curtail the quality of life of our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: Fantastic—and I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his question. Of course, he is absolutely right that we want thriving high streets. Britain's retailers are a crucial part of our economy, supporting over 3 million jobs and contributing over £90 billion to our economy. The Competition and Markets Authority is independent, and it has made its assessment. People have different views on that, but my right hon. Friend makes a good case for a debate on what more we can do to support our high streets, and I recommend that he go to the Backbench Business Committee to seek such a debate.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Please can we have a debate on the Government's EU settlement scheme? I know constituents who are struggling with the online process, and people who have been here for many years are finding it difficult to supply the documents. We still have no news from the Government about when there may be funding for support services in the community. The Government need to get this right quickly.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. In fact, the EU settlement scheme is being well used. As I understand it, several hundred thousand settlement arrangements have already been agreed. I am sure the Government will be very keen to hear feedback on any areas of concern for right hon. and hon. Members. I suggest that this is raised at the next Exiting the European Union questions, so that she can raise this issue directly with Ministers.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is just a matter of fact that the United Kingdom would have left the European Union either on 29 March or on 12 April except for the Prime Minister, and the Prime Minister alone, going to Brussels and asking for an extension, so to say that the reason there are European elections is down to not passing the Government's atrocious withdrawal Bill is wrong. Will the Leader of the House make that point clear, and will she also confirm that we will not only debate what my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has suggested, but vote on it?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is very well aware that it is the Government's policy to leave the European Union in an orderly way, and that means leaving with a deal. He will also be aware that the decision of this House not to support that deal, and indeed to require an extension to article 50, is the reason why such an extension has been agreed. I have made it clear to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) that we will be able to grant a debate on the statutory instrument he has prayed against.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Over the bank holiday period, there were two major moorland fires close to my constituency and one major fire in my constituency. One heroic firefighter took to social media to air his concerns, saying that despite their best efforts, mother

[Paula Sherriff]

nature had beaten them. He had begged for further resources and was told that none was available. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), may we have an urgent debate in Government time to discuss the resources available to our beleaguered fire services?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I pay tribute to the amazing work of firefighters. Particularly at this time of year and as we get to the summer, moorland fires and forest fires are a real problem and a challenge for them. I encourage the hon. Lady to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that she can raise her concern about resources directly with a Minister.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Given the enormous environmental concerns, may we have a debate in Government time about the enormous success of Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council's recycling and rubbish collection services? It would focus on four specific issues: the amazing combined dry recycling bin service introduced last year; the green waste collection service for 30,000 households; the total fleet replacement; and the additional vehicle for the commercial collection service. Does the Leader of the House realise that this Conservative-controlled council is one of the leading councils in the midlands, and will she look kindly on my request for a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I commend my hon. Friend for raising that issue and I pay tribute to the impressive performance of his excellent Conservative Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council. We are committed to increasing the quality and quantity of recycling and to ensuring that it is easier for everyone. Local authorities play a vital role in waste collection and recycling and we are consulting on how we can help them to improve services. That consultation closes on 13 May, which is in fact my birthday.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Following the Windrush scandal, my constituent was plunged into financial difficulties. He was unable to see his father before he died because he could not afford the return flight to Barbados. He spent the last of his money on a one-way ticket to attend the funeral, but he is now stranded there. His request for an exceptional payment has rolled on for months while he has been plunged into poverty. May we have a debate in Government time about the effectiveness of the compensation scheme for Windrush victims?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the situation of the hon. Lady's constituent. As she will know, Ministers have apologised for the mistakes that were made. Windrush citizens are British and deserve to be treated as such, and a dedicated taskforce set up to handle those cases has so far helped more than 2,400 people to get the documentation they need. She will be aware that there is also a compensation scheme and, if she wants to write to me following business questions, I will raise her particular issue directly with Ministers.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate about equipping young people for the world of work? This evening, I will be joining graduates and supporters

of Career Ready in Moray to celebrate their achievements over the last year. They include a national winner, Lee Scott from Keith Grammar School, who was engineering student of the year. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating everyone involved with the Moray Career Ready programme on what it does for young people and the businesses involved?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Lee and all those involved with the Moray Career Ready programme. Preparing students for adult life is one of the Government's top priorities. The Careers and Enterprise Company, which has provided funding to Career Ready, links employers with schools and colleges and improves opportunities for young people to learn about the world of work. I congratulate everyone involved and wish them an enjoyable evening to celebrate their achievements.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on foodbanks? Today, the Trussell Trust announced that Wales has received more than 100,000 referrals to foodbanks over the last year and there has been a 43% rise in food parcels in the last five years. A third of all referrals have been down to benefit payments coming in late, and 51% of all referrals were made because of a delay in the payment of benefits linked to universal credit. Most concerning, a spokesperson from the Department for Work and Pensions said that it is a challenge and that it is not correct to link the rise in foodbanks to the roll-out of universal credit. However, the Work and Pensions Secretary stood at the Dispatch Box and said that there is a link. May we have a statement or debate about that, and will the DWP clarify what is causing that rise in referrals, as the Department's spokespeople clearly do not agree with the Secretary of State?

Andrea Leadsom: Foodbanks represent an impressive response by civil society and faith groups to supporting vulnerable people and we should thank them for all they do. The hon. Gentleman is making a serious point about the Trussell Trust report. The previous Government did not allow jobcentres to point people towards foodbanks but, since 2010, the Government have encouraged people and signposted them so that they can seek help. Universal credit is a far simpler measure to provide people with support to get into work, and some of the work in the Trussell Trust report predates changes that have been made to universal credit to ensure that people can get a whole month of payments upfront and do not need to wait. There are also measures to introduce a two-week overlap of housing benefit payments to ensure that people do not have to wait for money. I believe that the situation he describes has been significantly improved by measures that have already been taken to tighten up payments for universal credit.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Despite Scotland's NHS, schools and transport system failing, the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, announced yesterday that she will push ahead with a second referendum to break up the United Kingdom. May we have a debate to discuss the need to respect the results of referendums? Will the Leader of the House join me in reminding the leader of the SNP in Scotland that Scotland voted to remain part of the

United Kingdom and does not want another divisive referendum? Nicola Sturgeon should get on with her day job.

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is extraordinary that, although there was a referendum only in 2014, with an overwhelming majority for Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom, rather than focusing on improving Scotland's economy and schools, the Scottish nationalists are determined to ask people again because they did not get the result they wanted. We urge the Scottish nationalists to focus on delivering for the people of Scotland. May I also wish my hon. Friend the best of success in running the London marathon this weekend?

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Paul Williams—another very fit fellow.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I am also running the London marathon this weekend, Mr Speaker. Residents and businesses in Thornaby in my constituency are becoming increasingly concerned about rising levels of antisocial behaviour. They see people on the street acting with impunity because the police simply do not have the resources adequately to police the area. I know that tackling ASB involves more than just police, but the community I represent does not feel safe and needs serious Government action. Can the Leader of the House help me to get it?

Andrea Leadsom: I also wish the hon. Gentleman every success in running the London marathon. I think 16 Members are tackling it, so good luck to all of them. Perhaps they could carry me and I could join in. I certainly could not run it, but I wish them great success.

The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point about antisocial behaviour and the appalling impact it has on communities. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss what more can be done to address the concerns in his community directly with Ministers.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Neighbourhood plans have been around for a long time—indeed, since I helped to invent them in 2011—so may we have a debate to discuss what they have been able to achieve for communities?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad my hon. Friend reminds us that he was instrumental in writing those local plans. In my constituency, local people have very much welcomed the opportunity to determine what happens, and where and how new development takes place. That is crucial if we are to meet our ambition of ensuring that everybody has a safe and secure home of their own. I encourage him to seek a Backbench Business Committee debate so that all hon. Members can share their views and experiences.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I thought I would start by asking a question that was sent to me on Twitter by @Bravespace3:

“Where is @edwardtimpson review on school exclusions which was supposed to be released last autumn? It could help @sajidjavid understand that a #publichealth approach to violence is about more than blaming overworked professionals. @vickyfoxcroft do you know when it's published?”

Well, @Bravespace3, I have asked eight times and I am really hoping that the Leader of the House will update us today.

Andrea Leadsom: As I said to the hon. Lady last week, my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards would be delighted to meet her to discuss that issue. I hope she has taken him up on that offer.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Sixteen more colleagues wish to contribute, and I would like to move on no later than 1.15 pm. Let us see what we can do.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It has been many weeks since the Prime Minister's knife crime summit and in the meantime the wave of violence and knife crime continues to sweep London and other parts of Britain. Last night there was a double stabbing in my constituency, close to my office. When will the Home Secretary come to the Chamber, report on the summit and outline his plans?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the latest stabbings in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and I know he has raised this issue in the Chamber on a number of occasions. He will be aware that the Government take this issue incredibly seriously. We have announced up to £970 million extra investment in the policing system for next year, as well as in the spring statement £100 million of immediate funding to enable police and crime commissioners to put further police officers on the streets to try to tackle the immediate problems. However, this is a much bigger issue than that. Our Offensive Weapons Bill has brought forward the means to restrict the sale of knives online and the introduction of knife crime prevention orders, and our £200 million youth endowment fund seeks to get young people away from being tempted into a life of knife crime and serious violence.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), I think everybody is asking, “Where is the Home Secretary with respect to knife crime?” The Leader of the House has said week after week that she is asking him to come to make a statement. He obviously got confused because he did make a statement on knife crime but not to the House of Commons; on 16 April, I think, he announced all sorts of policies to tackle this. Only today, we see why Member after Member raises this issue. The Office for National Statistics published figures today that show homicides at record levels and that knife crime offences are at the highest they have been since records began—and the Home Secretary does not appear at the Dispatch Box. Will she go back again and ask him where he is?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that we have had a number of debates, urgent questions and statements in recent months on serious violence. The Prime Minister has held a summit to try to tackle this very serious issue, looking at how we can bring in all stakeholders in the NHS, education and different local government services. In addition, the Government are investing significant sums in community schemes

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

that are trying to get young people away from gang crime and knife crime. The Government are doing everything in their power to tackle this appalling issue, but I have taken away his concerns and raised with the Home Office the desire of many hon. Members for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to come to the House to make a further statement.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Largs foodbank in my constituency has experienced significantly increased usage since November 2018: an increase of between 200% and 300% on the same period in the previous year. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out her concerns that too many people are struggling to put food on the table? In-work poverty is a disgrace and we need to do more to ensure that everyone has enough to eat.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that, in this country, nobody should go hungry. The Government have invested significant time, energy, effort and money into ensuring that universal credit replaces an old system where many people did not get the benefits they were entitled to because the system was so complicated. The new system of universal credit helps people into work and supports them to meet their own needs for as long a time as necessary while they find work for themselves and their families.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): This Sunday, 28 April, marks International Workers' Memorial Day, supported by the trade unions. Many trade union councils up and down the country will be holding events. What are the Government doing to remember the dead and to fight for the living, and to remember the workers who have died at work?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. It is vital that we remember all those who have lost their lives through work, sometimes through negligence but often through accidents and so on. He may wish to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can put on the record his views and some of the reminiscences and memories of those who have lost loved ones.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): May I echo the calls for a debate on the EU settlement scheme? I have a Spanish constituent who has made her home here for 46 years, but it seems that because she registered in the 1970s for indefinite leave she is being told she has to apply for a biometric permit rather than the settlement scheme. That is costing her time, money and unnecessary stress. When can a Minister come to the House to explain why EU citizens still seem to be experiencing a hostile environment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the EU settlement scheme is being well used. It has been well established and the feedback seems to be generally positive. I am very happy, as always, to take up a specific issue on his behalf, if he would like to write to me after business questions. If it is a more general concern that he wants to raise, perhaps he could bring it up with Exiting the European Union Ministers at the next oral questions.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Thank goodness the fire at Notre Dame led to no loss of life, but if we were to have a fire in this building, parts of which are considerably older than Notre Dame, we might not be so lucky because there are 9,000 people who work here every day. Is it not time that we use this as a wake-up call? I know the Leader of the House agrees with me, but will she put on her hobnail boots, storm over to Downing Street, stamp her feet and force the Prime Minister to bring forward the parliamentary buildings Bill as fast as possible? We cannot have the French rebuild Notre Dame in five years and us still thinking about leaving 10 years later.

Andrea Leadsom: I am extremely sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman's request. He might find traces of my hobnail boots on their way over to No. 10 over the past week or so. That prospect was not lost on me either. I was so sorry to see the terrible fire at Notre Dame. It was an absolute tragedy for the world. He is of course absolutely right that we have to ensure that we do everything possible to bring forward our own restoration and renewal Bill as soon as possible. Watch this space.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The only 24-hour ATM in Ferguslie Park in my constituency charges 95 pence per withdrawal. The ATM is outside LINK's financial inclusion subsidy criteria, despite Ferguslie Park being the most deprived area in Scotland. May we have a debate on ATM charges and fair access to cash?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very concerning issue. I must admit that I had understood that most ATMs in deprived areas were now required not to charge for services. I recommend that he raises his particular question at Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions on Tuesday 30 April directly with Ministers.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Trussell Trust army of volunteers were shamefully forced to provide 1.6 million packages of support last year, including for 600,000 children. Southwark saw an extra 1,000 people, a rise of 25%, including for many with persistent universal credit problems. When will the Government allow time to debate the grotesque reliance on food banks that Ministers have created since 2010?

Andrea Leadsom: I just do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's assessment. In fact, while it is absolutely unacceptable that people have to go hungry at any time, the Government's policy has been to introduce universal credit as a means to help people. Some 2.4 million households will be better off as a result of changes we made at Budget. We always provide a strong safety net through the welfare system for those who need extra support. What is absolutely vital is that universal credit itself is a much simpler system that is enabling people, who previously were losing through the complexity of the many different facets of the old welfare system, to get the money they are entitled to. That is absolutely vital.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), Change UK is now a political party and we have 11 Members. Together

we certainly are, I would suggest, entitled to an Opposition day debate and we would like to have it on the people's vote. I and others would be very happy to meet the Leader to discuss how we can ensure we now have Opposition day debates that reflect the real representation across the Chamber.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always happy to meet right hon. and hon. Members who want to propose procedural changes and that would be the case in the right hon. Lady's situation.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Can I say to the Government that there is a crime crisis in this country? In Greater Manchester, it is evident to every single person who lives in our community. Every single day, 600 crimes in Greater Manchester are not even investigated because the police do not, after a cut of £183 million a year, have the resources to deal with them. We are now at the stage where local communities are actively pursuing setting up private security companies to police our communities. How can that be right and fair, and what does it do for the future of policing in this country?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly important point. It is absolutely right that we do everything we can to ensure we keep our communities safe. That is why the Government have provided an extra £970 million of investment in the policing system next year. It is the case that the Opposition voted against that. They need to answer the question as to why they did that. It is vital that police and crime commissioners have the resources they need to deal not only with the problems of serious violence and knife crime, but the rising levels of cyber-crime, drug-related crime and so on. That is why the Government have prioritised extra resources for the police system.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A report produced recently by Christian Solidarity Worldwide states that in certain parts of Mexico, members of religious minority groups are often pressured by local authorities either to convert to the majority faith or to participate in activities such as religious festivals that are linked to the majority faith. If they refuse, local leaders often strip them of basic services such as education by barring their children from school. In extreme cases, discrimination results in forced displacement, and children are left fully deprived of their right to education. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this important matter?

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Gentleman has raised a very important point. We are committed to freedom of religious belief, and are very concerned about the severity and scale of violations of that freedom of belief in many parts of the world.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, on 4 July 2018 the Prime Minister announced that Lord Ahmad would be the special envoy on freedom of religious belief, and on 26 December the Foreign Secretary announced an independent review of the persecution of Christians. The review will be conducted by the Bishop of Truro, and will make recommendations on additional practical steps that the Foreign Office can take to support persecuted Christians. The bishop will publish a report by the summer.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): On Tuesday I will launch an all-party parliamentary group on towing and trailer safety, following the tragic death of a toddler in my constituency in 2014. I am grateful for the Government's support for the work that I have been doing on trailer safety, and for the support of Members on both sides of the House for the APPG. May I ask the Leader of the House to support the work that we all try to do in APPGs as a good way of highlighting safety issues that are vital to our constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to commend and pay tribute to all APPGs, and in particular the one on trailer safety to which the hon. Lady has referred. Issues that crop up in our own constituencies—often, unfortunately, as a result of tragedies involving our constituents—can lead to real change.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud that so many of my fellow residents and friends have been in London with Extinction Rebellion, although I shall welcome them back home after today. Given the words of Greta Thunberg—and, more particularly in my case, Polly Higgins, the great campaigner for a law on ecocide who sadly died earlier this week—will the Government now introduce their environment Bill? We do not seem to be doing much else at the moment, and saving the planet from climate change is one valuable thing that they could seek to do.

Andrea Leadsom: We certainly share a passionate desire to tackle the issue of global climate change and protect our planet for future generations. We understand the concerns of those who are protesting, but we are interested in solutions, not disruption.

I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we are working hard on what is the first environment Bill in over 20 years, but that is not the only thing we are doing to improve our contribution to reducing global emissions. As I said earlier, we have reduced greenhouse gas emissions in this country by 25% since 2010, and air pollution has been reduced significantly since then. Emissions of toxic nitrogen oxides have fallen by 29%, and are at their lowest level since records began. There is more to do, but a great deal is already being achieved.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The fabulous Etape Loch Ness event will take place this Sunday, when nearly 6,000 people will get on their bikes and cycle around Loch Ness. May we have a debate in Government time on how to encourage more cycling across the board and, in particular, how to learn from the successful outcome in Scotland, where, for example, a Sustrans project has led to a 300% increase in the number of girls cycling since 2009?

Andrea Leadsom: I thought the hon. Gentleman was going to ask me whether I believed in the Loch Ness monster, but his question was much more serious than that. Cycling is absolutely to be recommended—it is fantastic for our health, and for reducing emissions—and it is great that so many of the hon. Gentleman's constituents are taking part in that bike ride.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Millions of people are not on the electoral register. There is anecdotal evidence that providing the necessary national insurance

[Nick Smith]

information could be part of the problem, especially for young people. May we have a statement about the sharing of data between public agencies to increase voter registration and help to boost our democracy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important issue. We want to increase voter registration and ensure that as many people as possible participate in our democracy. Questions to the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission will take place on 9 May, and the hon. Gentleman may think it worth raising the point then to see what more can be done.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Would the Leader of the House consider arranging a debate in Government time on levels of support for black and minority ethnic women, particularly those with refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds? During the Easter recess I had the great privilege of attending the opening of a childcare and learning centre in my constituency by Saheliya, a charity that does fantastic work to empower such women, and to see how it is transforming lives. Will the Leader of the House commend its work, and also consider how it could provide an exemplar for the rest of the country?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has seen fit to raise this issue, and delighted by his happiness about the work that his constituents are doing. It is vital for us all to do everything we can to support refugees who have come to this country, particularly black and ethnic-minority women—and men as well, but it is often the women who have suffered so much. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue, and to praise that charity for what it is doing to highlight the need for further support.

Carbon Capture Usage and Storage

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.16 pm

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. Anna Turley will speak on her subject for up to 10 minutes. I remind colleagues that, because the statement is analogous with a ministerial statement, no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and will call Anna Turley to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

I call Anna Turley to speak on behalf of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a true privilege for me to make this statement on behalf of the Committee. I do so in the absence of its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves). I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for providing the time for us to introduce our report on carbon capture usage and storage, which we published this morning, and I pay tribute to all my colleagues on the Committee, who have worked extremely hard. It is great to see some of them in the Chamber this afternoon. I also pay tribute to our brilliant Clerks, who do an enormous amount of work and without whom we could not produce anything at all.

The climate change protest that we have seen this week, and the words of Greta Thunberg in this place, show that there are hugely important national, local and international political decisions to be made on climate change. How we can drastically cut carbon emissions and achieve clean growth is an issue that we must devote huge energy to answering. Experts agree that carbon capture usage and storage—CCUS—will be necessary to meet the UK's existing climate change targets at the lowest cost: without it, the costs of meeting our targets will double. Scientists also agree that it would not be credible for the UK to adopt a more ambitious net zero target—a question on which the Committee on Climate Change will provide its advice next week—if we fail to deploy CCUS at scale.

As our report explains, the UK is very lucky to have one of the most favourable environments in the globe for this technology. However, CCUS has suffered from turbulent policy support for 15 years. Most significantly, two major competitions to demonstrate the technology—worth £1 billion—have been cancelled, one in 2011 and one in 2016, after hundreds of millions of pounds of investment by both industry and Government. That the technology works is not in question. There are 18 large-scale operational facilities worldwide, but no commercial-scale CCUS plants have yet been built in the UK.

The Government's clean growth strategy sets a new ambition to

“have the option to deploy CCUS at scale during the 2030s, subject to costs coming down sufficiently.”

The Committee welcomes that intention, but we are concerned that it does not demonstrate a sufficiently strong commitment and limits our climate change ambitions, the future for our heavy industries and the potential for investment in CCUS. CCUS is already the cheapest option—in some cases the only option—for decarbonising many of our energy-intensive industries. Our witnesses were optimistic about the potential for cost reductions but told us that these will come through deploying the technology, not by waiting for further research and development.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth—I pay tribute to her for her support—has explained that she has no target for CCUS for developers to meet in order to access funding, and that needs to be rectified. We recommend that the Government prioritise the development of clear ambitions that will bolster their renewed efforts to kick-start CCUS. Rather than seeking unspecified cost reductions, they should set out plans to ensure that projects are brought forward at least cost. It is also not clear what scale of deployment the Government are targeting for the 2030s, so we have recommended that they provide ambition and clarity to investors by adopting specific targets to store 10 million tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2030, and 20 million tonnes by 2035, in line with the advice of the Committee on Climate Change.

The UK has a unique opportunity to lead global development of a new CCUS industry, thanks to our expansive geological storage resource and our world-class oil and gas supply chains. However, despite that favourable position, CCUS remains a relatively immature technology. We argue that this should be seen as a benefit, as it strengthens the potential for UK leadership, and we recommend that the Government prioritise CCUS in order to benefit from growing international demand for low-carbon products and services. We risk losing our early mover advantage if the UK's slow progress on CCUS continues.

CCUS can impose significant costs on industrial processes, but a failure to develop it could force many heavy industries to close in the coming decades. Witnesses were frustrated that policy decisions have historically focused on the costs of the technology, rather than the benefits. The creation of a CCUS network on the east coast alone could create 225,000 jobs and boost the economy by over £160 billion by 2050. But the benefits of CCUS appear to be poorly understood across Government Departments, not least by the Treasury.

The Government have set a target to commission the first CCUS facility by the mid-2020s, but we heard that might be too slow to ensure that at-scale deployment can be achieved by the 2030s. A more ambitious target, with the development of CCUS clusters in multiple regions across the country, would strengthen the Government's strategy for developing prosperous communities across the UK. Our report recommends that the Government raise their ambition and aim to develop initial CCUS projects in at least three clusters by 2025, minimising the risk of further delays and ensuring that productivity benefits accrue across the country.

My own region of Teesside has an ambition to become one of Europe's first clean industrial zones using CCS. The Teesside Collective in my constituency, a consortium of local industries, stands ready and waiting to start decarbonising UK industry. Teesside is home to nearly 60% of the UK's major energy users in the process and

chemicals sectors. To keep these industries thriving and competitive in a low-carbon world, we need to get serious about cleaning up their emissions. In 2016 our industrial emissions fell massively, but that was largely due to the closure of our steelworks. It goes without saying that we cannot meet our emission targets that way; it is immoral.

The internationally renowned North East of England Process Industry Cluster represents chemical-based industries across the region, but they are particularly concentrated in Teesside. The sector generates £26 billion in annual sales and £12 billion in exports, and it is the north-east's largest industrial sector. The chemicals sector is up against strong international competition, and NEPIC estimates that the use of CCS could create and safeguard almost 250,000 jobs by 2060. Last year the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative announced a strategic partnership with six major oil and gas companies to construct the world's first ever gas-powered energy plant on Teesside. The clean gas proposals, when delivered, would deploy full-chain CCUS.

Another proposal, the H21 report, commissioned by two of the UK's gas distributors, Northern Gas Networks and Cadent, sets out a solution to decarbonise heat in the north of England by replacing natural gas with hydrogen. The proposals would also utilise CCS to make hydrogen production zero-carbon. That is something the all-party parliamentary group on hydrogen, which I am proud to chair, is working hard to champion. As more than half of the UK's hydrogen is produced in Teesside, the area's potential to capitalise on CCUS is again evident.

It is clear that the private sector is invested in the huge potential for carbon capture and storage. However, when we met Teesside Collective representatives during our evidence-gathering session, they were frustrated that the Treasury did not seem yet to have fully bought into the idea. Leadership and funding from the public sector and the Government will be crucial for getting this technology off the ground. The Government's attempts to develop CCUS have previously centred on funding competitions. Although we welcome the Government's renewed promise of funding support, we are concerned that yet another competition may not be best suited to the needs of the sector.

During the Committee's visit to Teesside, we heard strong opposition to the idea of a third competition, because it creates tension between competition and collaboration. The UK's CCUS community has had a strong culture of collaboration to date, but that is being undermined by the competition structure. They pitched projects against one another and expressly limited knowledge sharing, which in turn slowed technological progress, research and development, and cost reduction. The Government should urgently consult on better approaches to allocating funding for CCUS industry clusters, and to promoting collaboration across the UK, including in those clusters that might take longer to get going.

CCUS presents huge opportunities for the UK economy, and it is a vital technology if we are going to meet our climate change targets. I congratulate the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth on her championing of this technology. However, the Government's targets for CCUS remain far too ambiguous to ensure investment. It is also concerning that not all of Whitehall seems to see

[Anna Turley]

the advantages of CCUS. The Treasury has been singled out to us over and over again for its lack of awareness of the benefits. It is imperative that any future decisions on how and when to fund this technology are taken with a full and thorough understanding of the critical role it is expected to play, not only in decarbonisation across the whole economy, but in extending the life of and modernising UK industry, such as that in Teesside.

Finally, in response to the Committee's report, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has said:

"We are pleased that the Committee shares our belief that CCUS can play an important role in meeting our climate targets."

I am afraid that is disappointing, because it completely glosses over the profound differences between the Government's approach and that of the Committee. The Government are saying that CCUS can be part of the solution, subject to costs coming down sufficiently, to a figure that they are not yet prepared to specify. We are saying that CCUS must be part of delivering our climate change targets at the lowest cost. Having decided to go ahead with CCUS, the question now is how to keep the costs down. For the sake of jobs and the economy in areas such as Teesside, and for the future of our planet and our climate targets, we need no more words, just action.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on her statement. I too am a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and I take some pride in the report. I think it offers an exciting opportunity for the United Kingdom in what will be an ever-expanding global market for this technology. My question is based on a summary statement in the report:

"The greatest barriers to the development of CCUS in the UK are commercial, rather than technical."

I think that is true. There is a massive opportunity for Scotland in this technology, which is why I am surprised that not a single member of the SNP's parliamentary party has turned up for the statement—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The idea is to have fairly brief questions and answers, because we have a lot of business to get through this afternoon.

Stephen Kerr: My question is really quite simple. There is a commercial barrier and it relates to the business model. Requiring a single business to finance the capture, transport and storage of carbon will greatly increase the cost of carbon dioxide stored, so what can the Government do to enable the development of viable business models for CCUS?

Anna Turley: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his commitment to and support for this. He is absolutely right that there are important steps that the Government could take to support this, which the Committee discussed in detail. The report starts to set those out. In particular, we look at the development of viable business models. He will remember that our witnesses agreed that CCUS costs could be substantially lowered by separating the business model for carbon capture in industrial facilities from that of the transport and storage infrastructure.

That could create much less risk in part of the process, because those two activities have very different cost and risk profiles. The Government should put more effort into establishing that, because it is very important. Although transport and storage infrastructure is expensive, a single facility could receive carbon from multiple sites, and it is estimated that the costs of transport and storage per tonne could be reduced by as much as 90% if infrastructure costs are shared across multiple capture points. Infrastructure is critical, and that is where the Government could play a huge role.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): When the Committee put forward its requirement for investment in substantial capacity, what did it think the cost of that increased capacity would be, and who should pay the bill?

Anna Turley: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's point. I understand that, after losing those two projects, any Government will have to carry out a cost-benefit analysis, and expenditure was one of the issues that was raised. We know that CCUS projects today are already much cheaper than those involved in the previous competitions. At that point, the cost was between £1 billion and £2.5 billion, but the cost of the projects coming through today is well under £500 million. That is a result of the learning that we have done in that time. I believe that CCUS will play an essential part in meeting our climate change targets. All the evidence, particularly that of the Committee on Climate Change, shows that if we do not deploy CCUS, the cost of meeting our targets will double. The Energy Technologies Institute estimates that the cost would rise from 1% of GDP to 2% of GDP, so the question is not whether we can afford to do this but whether we can afford not to do so.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I should like to follow the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). The House will understand what the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) has been saying, which is summarised in paragraph 32 of the report and in paragraph 10 on page 28 of the conclusions. It is important to realise that if we had judged town gas when it was first generated in Marsham Street, we would never have had a national network of pipelines and the resulting benefits for most consumers. May I also remind the House, through the hon. Lady, that it has been stated, rather inaccurately, that politicians have got away with not doing anything to fight the climate crisis and the ecological crisis for too long. That is wrong, as the Committee has shown. This is also illustrated by the fact that more than half our electricity has been generated totally by non-carbon-generating systems in the past few weeks.

Anna Turley: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that huge steps have been made, but it is clear that we are in a climate emergency and that every step we can take will have an impact. We have a huge opportunity here for the UK to lead the way globally on a vital technology that can really help us to establish our climate credentials, meet the targets to which we are committed and create huge amounts of investment, jobs and opportunities in new green industries and technologies in areas such as mine. I am delighted to support this.

BILLS PRESENTED

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (TERMINATION AWARDS AND SPORTING TESTIMONIALS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Amber Rudd, Secretary Greg Clark, Elizabeth Truss, Mel Stride, Robert Jenrick and John Glen, presented a Bill to provide for Class 1A national insurance contributions on certain termination awards; and to provide for the controller of a sporting testimonial to be the person liable to pay Class 1A national insurance contributions on payments from money raised by the testimonial.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 29 April, and to be printed (Bill 381) with explanatory notes (Bill 381-EN).

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (PREPARATION FOR DIGITAL SERVICES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary James Brokenshire, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr David Lidington, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Greg Clark, Mel Stride and Rishi Sunak, presented a Bill to make provision enabling the Commissioners for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to incur expenditure in connection with digital services to be provided by them for the purpose of facilitating the administration or payment of non-domestic rates in England.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 29 April, and to be printed (Bill 382) with explanatory notes (Bill 382-EN).

Backbench Business

School Funding

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to the Back-Bench motion on school funding. Before we start, I need to tell the House that we have, in theory, 28 speakers for the two debates this afternoon. I also have to take into account the opening speeches, the Front-Bench speeches and the wind-ups, so I ask the movers of the motions to stick to the limit of between 10 and 15 minutes, and I am sure colleagues would appreciate it if it were nearer to 10. I will also have to impose an immediate five-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches.

1.33 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the increasing financial pressures faced by schools; further notes that schools are having to provide more and more services, including those previously provided by other public agencies including health and local authorities; notes with concern funds for schools being spread more thinly and not being sufficient to cope with additional costs; and further calls on the Government to increase funding provided to schools to cover the additional services schools now perform for pupils.

I will not take interventions, on the grounds that it is a hugely important debate. I first held a debate on this issue in October 2018 in Westminster Hall under the title "School Funding", and it was extremely well attended. The concerns expressed then about the level of school funding were consistent. Hopes were high that the Minister would be in listening mode and that the Chancellor would open his wallet to find some extra funds. Obviously, that extra funding has not appeared, so it is crucial that the subject of funding for schools should be revisited at the earliest opportunity. We in this House need to keep up the pressure.

I am sure that the British public can be forgiven for thinking this House has taken leave of its senses, with Brexit acting as an all-consuming topic to the apparent exclusion of all others. Indeed, the message from the Chancellor in his spring statement appeared to be that any spare funding that might be available was being stashed away until Brexit was resolved. Our inability to progress Brexit now means that the British taxpayer will be forking out millions for European elections that may or may not be needed, and billions to extend the Brexit can-kicking. It is time we put the focus back on to the future of our young people and children, who deserve a first-class education in a decent school environment, well-staffed with highly qualified teachers and with adequately resourced classrooms. Today, this House needs to reassert its priorities. We need to put Brexit on the back burner and say that what matters is the future of our young people.

This issue has attracted significant interest across the House and the application for this debate had around 50 supporters from almost every party represented in this Chamber. I am sure that, like other hon. Members, I could simply dust off my October speech, because I know from the feedback I have heard nationally and locally that nothing has significantly changed in the months since my last debate on this issue. Parents are told that they have a choice on where their children can

[Mrs Anne Main]

attend school, yet every year parents and pupils in my constituency are left scrabbling around for school places, with some being offered places a 40-minute drive away. The same Minister is with us today, and I hope that he does not just dust off his October speech, because quite frankly it was not helpful at the time. As I said in my winding-up speech last time, repeating the same mantra over and over again but not admitting that there is a deep-rooted, systemic problem makes the Government look cloth-eared.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): He's not listening.

Mrs Main: I hope that the Minister is listening, and I hope we can have another shot today at persuading him that this funding crisis needs addressing. Brexit cannot be used as an excuse to keep kicking this can into the long grass.

The Government have told us repeatedly that record levels of funding are going to our schools. The simple facts tell us that more money is being spent overall, and that is a good thing, but schools are not feeling the effects of that increase. Teachers and heads keep telling me that we must differentiate between the school's budget and the teaching budget, and that although more money is being spent on education, it does not necessarily filter down to improve the experience of pupils and teachers.

The pressures facing schools are widely known across the House and in the Department for Education. It should worry us that, earlier this month, over 1,000 councillors wrote to the Secretary of State demanding more money for local schools. That is not just about campaigning for the local elections. Many of those people are on parent-teacher associations and understand the pressures that their schools are under. The campaign supported by those councillors emphasised the real-terms cut in per-pupil funding and the severe problems faced by local authorities in funding education, particularly for special educational needs and disability—SEND—pupils. Their letter stated that, according to the Education Policy Institute, almost a third of all council-run secondary schools and eight in 10 academies are now in deficit.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently found that per-pupil school spending had fallen by 8% in real terms since 2010. That must be considered alongside the fact that, according to the DFE's own figures, there are now 500,000 more pupils in our schools than there were in 2010. That is half a million extra young minds to neuter—

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Nurture!

Mrs Main: Nurture! Not neuter!

That is half a million extra young minds to nurture, and that cannot be done on the cheap. I am not asking the Minister for a loaves-and-fishes miracle for my local schools. I do not expect a smaller amount of money to be spread among more people. I am asking for a financial settlement to reflect the extra strain on the budget, and a funding formula that delivers for all our schools. We must not rob Peter to pay Paul when the formula is next tinkered with.

The IFS has also reported that school sixth forms have endured a 21% reduction in per-pupil spending since 2011, and it estimates that by 2019-20, spending per sixth-form pupil will be lower than at any point since 2002. That is going back a very long way. I am sure that the Minister will agree that the picture varies, but the signs indicate that schools are not benefiting universally, and we must find a new funding formula. Many schools I have spoken to have reiterated that the national funding formula must cover the funding needed for schools, not just the pupil-led aspect. Pupils and parents expect those schools to be fit for purpose as well as to provide lessons.

The Sutton Trust reports that up to two thirds of secondary schools have had to cut teaching staff for financial reasons. We are also seeing a worrying trend in cuts to the extracurricular activities and facilities that can be so important for children as they make their way through their school careers. Around 60% of secondary school teachers have reported cuts in IT equipment for cost reasons, with 40% stating that school outings have been cut, too. We must therefore be concerned that almost a third of teachers polled by the Sutton Trust reported a cut in sporting provisions for pupils in their schools.

I said it in the previous debate and I will say it again that Sian Kilpatrick, the head of Bernards Heath Junior School in my constituency, wrote to parents—she is not alone in that—to explain the financial squeeze that her school faces due to funding restrictions. She compiled a list of all the additional things to which she must allocate funding—not a nice-to-have list, but a must-be-done list—that includes vital outdoor risk assessments, legal human resources advice, general maintenance costs and staff insurance payments, which are just some of the additional costs for which schools have to find money. On top of that, she even had to pay £8,000 to get her school's trees pruned. Schools across the country face similar shopping lists that will suck up vital school funding.

Schools are also concerned about their lack of ability to plan their finances. With the introduction of the national funding formula happening over several years, there is huge uncertainty about how it will affect individual schools, and headteachers are unwilling to commit to long-term planning, which cannot be right. Whichever Government are in power, we need long-term certainty for our schools' futures. Angela Donkin of the National Foundation for Educational Research cites several key factors that have stretched school budgets in recent years. I will not go through all the factors, because I know how many Members want to speak. I am sure that others will list them today, but they include, to name but a few, an increase in employer national insurance contributions and employer pension contributions, ageing building stock, the teacher pay award and the requirement for all students to continue in education.

The requirement on schools to offer services previously carried out by other public agencies can be seen across the country. A survey by WorthLess? found that 94% of headteachers polled said that their schools now routinely deliver services previously provided by local authorities. This is not a point of debate, but whoever is asked—no matter the local authority, county or politician—will agree with it. All these factors have resulted in immense strain on school budgets. More money is going into schools, but so much more is being asked of the money.

Staff and staffing costs are under severe pressure. Many school staff in my constituency cannot afford to live in the area, so the staff turnover and churn is huge. Many staff are let go because schools can find it easier and cheaper to take on newly qualified, less-expensive members of staff. With the difficult roles that our teachers now must fulfil, we cannot expect a school to be run by young, inexperienced teachers. Is it any wonder that the number of teachers leaving the profession within four years is on the rise and that the number of vacancies and temporarily filled posts is increasing?

I will not go through all my facts and figures, because I want to leave myself a couple of minutes to sum up at the end, but there is widespread unhappiness about the handling of the recent teacher pay announcement. The key problem is that schools themselves have to fund the first 1% of the pay rise—there is nothing like dipping one's hand into someone else's pocket, Chancellor. We want to pay our teachers and teaching assistants more, because they do a wonderful job, but if we increase their pay, we cannot expect schools to fund some of that increase, because the money will have to come from somewhere else. Declan Linnane, the head of Nicholas Breakspear Catholic School in St Albans, told me that the 1% increase alone will cost his school £30,000—money that he just does not have.

The Department for Education reports that upwards of 1 million pupils have special educational needs in our schools, and the number has risen significantly recently. Those children will often need classroom assistants and help, and they often represent an additional requirement on school resources, so is it any wonder that parents are telling me that there is often reluctance to statement children with special educational needs or that there are greater school exclusions among pupils with difficulties that manifest themselves in destructive classroom behaviour?

I will conclude my remarks with three questions for the Minister. First—this comes from a teacher in my constituency—what guarantees can we have regarding the cost of teacher pension contribution increases and salary increases? He said that we have only been given funding information for the 2019-20 academic year, with nothing beyond that point. Secondly, staff recruitment is at crisis level and recent initiatives are failing, so how can the Government make the profession more attractive to graduates? Thirdly, the basic rate for 16 to 19-year-old funding has been frozen at £4,000 a student since 2013-14, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that school sixth forms have faced budget cuts of 21% per student, so what commitment can the Minister give that that will be addressed?

1.44 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and the other co-sponsors for securing this important debate on school funding. There are few subjects more important to this House than the future of the nation's children. They will be the inheritors of a post-Brexit Britain. They will be digital natives, as unfazed by digital technology as we are by electricity. We will bequeath to them the big challenges facing the country and the world, such as climate change, new kinds of labour market, and many more. That is why it is so important to invest in our young people's talents and ensure that they are among the best educated in the world.

Let me start with the ugly truth: this Government are letting the next generation down. Ministers are failing to make the necessary investment, and the Government are endangering our prosperity and productivity by not investing in education and skills.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I am conscious of the differences between the English and Welsh systems, but given the concerns of teachers, parents and students, does my hon. Friend agree that we need to be spending a higher percentage of our GDP on education?

Rushanara Ali: I absolutely agree. We need cross-party agreement to ensure that we invest in our children's futures, because that will ensure our nation's prosperity.

School funding has been cut in successive Budgets since 2010, and that has continued into this Parliament, as the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned. Since just 2015, when the previous Prime Minister won his short-lived majority, nine out of 10 schools have seen real-terms cuts in per-pupil spending. If Ministers had maintained spending even at 2015 levels, overall school funding would be £5.1 billion higher than it is. Across the board, from early years to further education, funding cuts are devastating our young constituents' lives when they should be supported.

The Education Policy Institute found that the proportion of local authority secondary schools in deficit has trebled to more than a quarter of all such schools. My constituency has the highest child poverty rate in the country, with an 11 percentage point increase since 2015, but its schools and colleges face drastic cuts. An enlightened Department for Education would put resources into the schools that need them, not take them away. Schools in my constituency face a £16 million funding cut between 2015 and 2020, which is an assault on aspiration.

Education in my constituency was transformed over the previous decade, thanks to investment and Government support, but taking all that away damages lives and makes matters worse. The same can be said for many constituencies across the House. It is so important to reverse the cuts and to reverse the increase in class sizes, because the same things are happening elsewhere, including in pockets of poverty in leafy suburbs—I recognise the points made by Conservative Members—but we must not punish poor areas such as my constituency by taking resources away. We must level up, not start a race to the bottom. We need to avoid a divisive approach that pits MPs against each other for much-needed resources for their schools, which has been the tendency over recent years following the assault on the fair funding formula and cuts more generally. We have fewer teaching assistants. Teachers are leaving education. There are massive problems with infrastructure and lack of investment. Just like the NHS, we need a new consensus to ensure investment and to protect young people's futures by ensuring that they can pursue meaningful careers and make a positive contribution to our society.

In the 2018 Budget, the Chancellor said that he would provide £400 million of extra cash, but the reality is that we need billions. He told the Treasury Committee yesterday that the comprehensive spending review could be delayed due to the lack of clarity around Brexit, yet the Government have spent over £4 billion preparing for a no-deal Brexit. We need to prioritise the comprehensive

[*Rushanara Ali*]

spending review, and if it does not come soon, the Government must step in and ensure that schools get the much-needed funding they require.

We need pupils to be taught in decent-sized, safe classrooms with good, modern equipment and with motivated teachers, tailored education for all and a range of cultural enrichments. We need to make sure pupils realise their full potential. We need to make sure the education system not only tackles social exclusion and discrimination but ensures that all children thrive so that we have the world-class economy we need to face future challenges. We need our education system to provide the future engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, artists and writers, and we need it to be the best in the world. That is what is lacking, because this Government lack the aspiration and the courage to invest in our future by investing in future generations of young people. I call on the Minister to take urgent action to invest in our schools to reverse the negative impacts and support our kids.

1.50 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): The Education Committee's inquiry on school and college funding has sought to bring together two seemingly irreconcilable views of the world. The first view is that schools are seeing year-on-year funding reductions and, having largely exhausted non-staff savings through efficiencies, are increasingly moving to the bulk of their budget, which is spent on staff, to find savings. The second view is that, amid the challenging public finances of 2010, difficult decisions were made that saw the core schools budget protected over the lifetime of that Parliament.

Of course the Government have a sense of the public finances, but so do schools, teachers and parents with whom we are in almost constant communication. I visit schools in my Harlow constituency every week and am well aware of the funding pressures they face. William Martin infant and junior schools have had to restructure staff and make £360,000 of savings to set a viable three-year budget. It is a matter of some regret that the debate on education funding has become so polarised. I hope that through our report we will be able to reduce the distance between the different viewpoints.

I am pleased that, with the emergence of a strong and independent evidence base provided by the National Audit Office, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Education Policy Institute, among others, the additional cost pressures faced by schools and the effect of rising pupil numbers are now understood and accepted as fact. The 2015 spending review missed a real opportunity by failing to anticipate the pressures that schools face and by not seeing the importance of transitional funding to support the implementation of the national funding formula.

Throughout our inquiry, we have been told that the school funding picture is much more complex than a simple question of inputs and outputs. Andreas Schleicher from the OECD explained how increasing education expenditure does not necessarily lead to greater performance, either in productivity or in international surveys such as PISA. Pumping huge amounts of money into the school system without a proper plan or programme of reform is unlikely to lead to good results. That has been illustrated throughout our inquiry.

We need to look at the pupil premium, because its accountability mechanisms seem totally ineffective. Teachers and headteachers have repeatedly told us that the money ends up being spent on matters wider than targeted support for disadvantaged children. What is to be done? In the past, the Government had something of a strategy for the school system, and the Minister for School Standards will update the Committee on that during a hearing on accountability next week, but we need to go beyond a more direct relationship between the Department and schools and articulate the purpose of education policy and schools at the moment. Is it to top the PISA rankings? Is it to produce a higher proportion of graduates? Is it to prepare the economy for the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution? Most importantly, is it to address social injustice in our education system?

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I respect the right hon. Gentleman's considerable experience in this field. Simon Kidwell, a headteacher in my constituency, has called for a more long-term funding arrangement. The current funding arrangement is just not sufficient to fund schools in my constituency and beyond.

Robert Halfon: I think what I am about to say will answer the hon. Gentleman's point, because I strongly agree with him.

I want Ministers, in the strongest possible terms, to embrace wholeheartedly our proposal to have a 10-year strategic plan for education. Indeed, I am encouraged by the Minister's response to the Committee at the beginning of the month. There has to be a shared vision beyond the next election, whenever that might be. The principle of school-based autonomy lay at the heart of policy in 2010. We have identified some of its limitations, particularly when it comes to governance, financial management and accountability. But autonomy within boundaries is a sound principle from which to start.

A 10-year strategic plan ought to be accompanied by a long-term funding plan, as the hon. Gentleman has just said. That funding plan, if not stretching beyond the spending review period, should set clear expectations for what it would cost to fund schools and colleges to do their jobs.

The NHS now has a long-term, 10-year strategic plan and a five-year funding settlement, which has come about following serious advocacy by NHS England and by the previous and current Health Secretaries, who strongly made the case both for more funding and for funding accompanied by proper reform. It mystifies me that perhaps the most important public service of all, education and skills, does not seem to receive the same attention or public advocacy for a similar path.

I have said in the Education Committee that the Department is sometimes like the cardinals at the Vatican in its negotiations with the Treasury, hoping that a bit of white funding smoke may appear from the rooftops, but, as the NHS argument has shown, this is not the right approach. I very much hope the Department will negotiate a 10-year plan with the Treasury and come to the House, as the Health Secretary did, to set it out. We need a proper funding settlement lasting at least five years, just as the national health service has had, so we can stop having these day-to-day battles on the finances of schools and further education colleges and so that our wonderful teachers can carry on teaching and our children can carry on learning.

1.57 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

As the daughter of two teachers, I remember the 1980s and '90s as a time of chronic underfunding in our schools. There were not enough books to go around, and lessons were held in crumbling classrooms and temporary huts. I recall my parents being overworked, undervalued and underpaid, and my dad, a local National Union of Teachers branch chair, fighting for better conditions for both pupils and staff. The teachers at my school worked tirelessly, and I owe them a huge debt of gratitude, but it often felt like the Government and the local authority had no aspiration for the girls at my south-east London comprehensive.

If we keep on the current trajectory of underfunding and asking ever more of our teachers, I fear we are likely to end up repeating the mistakes of the past. Every child deserves a decent education, regardless of who they are and where they live. The remedy to our current schools funding crisis is quite simple: investment in schools yields results. Between 1997 and 2010, education spending rose by 78%, the biggest increase over any decade since the mid-1970s. Full-time-equivalent teacher numbers rose by 48,000, school buildings were transformed and attainment levels soared. Yet since 2010, under successive austerity and cost-cutting Governments, we have seen school funding slip back to profoundly inadequate levels. On current trends, schools in Lewisham and Bromley will see real-terms cuts of £8.8 million and £14.1 million respectively between 2015 and 2020, an average of around £300 per pupil.

When the Chancellor came to this House to deliver his Budget, his promise of the “little extras” for schools was little more than a platitude—this was a mere £45 extra per pupil. These token gestures of cash here and there go no way to repairing the damage that long-term underinvestment has done to our schools. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies annual report on education spending in England, even if per pupil funding had been maintained at 2015 levels, annual spending on schools would be £1.7 billion higher this year.

The Government have been warned time and again about the damage that austerity is having on the education sector and have had ample opportunity to change course. However, throughout this austerity-driven funding, since 2010, we have seen £3.5 billion-worth of cuts to schools and average teacher pay down £4,000 in real terms. I have visited more than 30 schools in my constituency since my election, and have been consistently told that recruitment and retention are major issues across the board. Teachers are the backbone of the schools system, but a recent poll showed that 81% of teachers said they have considered leaving the profession because of the pressures of workload. Teachers are working harder but losing out in their pay packets. If this Government really value the work of teachers, they should match their rhetoric with the funding and pay that teachers not only require, but fully deserve.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ellie Reeves: I will not give way, because of time constraints.

As the motion notes,

“schools are having to provide more and more services, including those previously provided by other public agencies including health and local authorities”.

We have recently been in the midst of a knife crime crisis in this country, and my constituents have experienced the shock and anger of seeing young people needlessly losing their lives as a result. I am pleased that there is consensus for a public health approach to tackle knife crime, but that can be successful only if we see funding restored to local public services. It is imperative that this also includes a boost to school funding. Schools are having to do more and more. This Government cannot stand by, continuing to increase the burden but neglecting to increase the funding. So I have to urge the Minister: it is surely time to think again about the funding modelling used at present and to make the changes necessary to properly invest in our children's futures.

2.2 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you may recall that I once, shamefully, fell asleep in this Chamber, but I assure you that I have never been so exhausted as when, for seven years, I was a schoolmaster. I go away every summer to teach in Africa to remind myself of just what a demanding occupation it is. When I visit schools in my constituency and see the product they are turning out, in the face of extraordinary difficulties, I realise what an easy ride I had as a “beak”—I gave up teaching 30 years ago.

I have raised this issue with the Minister before. I accept that expenditure is at an all-time record and that although there has been some pressure on per-pupil funding, we spend more per pupil than any other wealthy country in the world bar the United States. But I want the Minister to focus on whether we are actually comparing like with like, and to consider what we are expecting our schools to do. Good schools in my constituency—96% of the pupils in my constituency attend good or outstanding schools—not only concentrate on subject teaching, as they do in so many other comparator nations, but turn out the whole person ready for life. It is exactly that strength of the British educational system that has made it such an envy of the rest of the world, providing quality and character for the whole person.

Of course, all sorts of savings might be had. We could narrow the curriculum. We could stop teaching some of the more expensive subjects, such as design and technology, which is taught in my constituency—not all schools do that—but I say to the Minister what a terrible tragedy it would be, in the modern world, to deny students that opportunity. We could reduce the level of pastoral support that schools are putting in. It is expensive, but it does ensure that so many pupils facing all sorts of issues are able to be in the classroom, benefiting from being taught. We could get rid of the classroom assistants or reduce their number, and some schools in my constituency are having to do that. After all, we did not have classroom assistants when I was at school. Clearly, however, we all understand that there are any number of vulnerable pupils who would simply not be able to take advantage of the curriculum were it not for the exemplary work undertaken by those classroom assistants. Schools might get rid of their school student counsellors—we did not have those when I was at school—but these schools are facing any number of problems, anxieties and mental

[*Sir Desmond Swayne*]

health issues among students that we never encountered in my day. Furthermore, the counsellors' time could be filled threefold, even at this current level. The infrastructure to deal with those problems outside schools simply does not exist—perhaps it ought to, but the reality is that it does not.

Any number of extra-curricular activities are dispensed and simply are not provided in some of the comparator nations where per-school expenditure is measured. So we could stop all those expensive dramatic productions. We could get rid of the fixture lists, and all the training and matches that take place. We could close down the Duke of Edinburgh awards. There is even a school in my constituency that runs a walled garden and keeps pigs. None of that was necessary in my day, but what a tragedy it would be to lose it.

In Hampshire, we are spending £3,811 per pupil in primary and £4,935 per pupil in secondary. The Secretary of State is getting a bargain; there are parents who are spending tens of thousands of pounds a year on their children to get a similar product. Will he bear that in mind, as well as the strength and importance of that product, as he takes forward his planning for the next financial review?

2.7 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): Education is the foundation of aspiration and the engine of social mobility, and it needs continued and growing investment. The best teachers and schools are part of the community, promoting the best educational welfare for the children for that community. But I hear overtures from the schools in the north-east and in Sedgefield and alarm bells are ringing, with budgets being cut, teaching staff being made redundant and parents fundraising for the essentials. Some £7 billion has been cut from the education budget for schools and colleges. Real-terms spending has reduced from £95.5 billion to £87.8 billion. In the north-east of England, 842 schools out of 1,004 that have been analysed face funding cuts. In County Durham, 194 schools out of 243 face cuts to their finances; the authority's schools will lose £8.1 million by 2020. This is second only to Northumberland in the region, which is set to see a cut of £8.9 million. In total, schools in the north-east will see a cut of £60 million. This is not good enough.

What is also not good enough is that according to the National Association of Head Teachers, 5,400 teachers have been cut nationally—that comes on top of cuts of 2,800 teaching assistants, 1,400 support staff and 1,200 auxiliary staff. The number of pupils being taught in supersize classes has trebled in the past five years. The proportion of local authority maintained primary schools that have spent more than their income rose significantly to more than 60% in 2016-17. Schools are having to make difficult decisions, as budgets have not kept pace with rising costs since 2010. The Bank of England points out that £100-worth of goods in 2010 costs more than £120 today, which is a 20% increase. Obviously school budgets have not risen in line with these rising costs.

Furthermore, there is a growing funding crisis for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. Because of cuts to local authority budgets affecting services to schools to support children with these needs, schools now have to find the first £6,000 of a support plan,

which is taken from the wider school budget rather than specific special needs-related funding. Durham County Council told me that it has a projected deficit in the high-needs budget for children with special educational needs and disabilities of £5 million by 2020. This comes at a time when need is increasing dramatically. The council is now needing to use funding from its reserves on a one-off basis to plug the deficit. A solution must be found in 2020-21, as the council cannot use reserves again for this purpose.

Using reserves to fund statutory duties for the education of our children is not sustainable. The educational opportunities of our children are being challenged now—teachers know it and parents know it. Local teachers tell me that because of the budget restraints, they have to cut back on the teaching and non-teaching staff who provide support for more vulnerable pupils; on repairs to schools buildings; and on the renewal of equipment, among other things.

A couple of weeks ago, a group of parents with children at Fishburn Primary School came to see me. They are leading a campaign against education cuts at the school. Scott Emsbury, Alana Baker and Katrina and Justin Boulton are deeply concerned about the pressure that budget cuts are placing on the school. They know that the teaching staff, led by Danny Eason, and all those who work at the school, are excellent and are doing their best, but they are now deeply concerned. The school will see a reduction in teaching staff because of budget cuts, and the ability to stretch the interests and minds of young children through additional activities is being challenged. The parents are organising petitions and fundraising events to provide the essentials, and doing everything they can to publicise the issues facing their local school.

Durham County Council told me that Fishburn Primary School will have a deficit of somewhere in the region of £20,000 by the end of the 2019-20 budget period. Had the funding formula kept pace with inflation, the school would have received £4,357 per pupil, rather than £4,000—it would have received £170,000 more since 2012-13. The Minister may say that funding has increased and that everything in the garden is rosy, but if parents are having to fundraise for the essentials, such an assertion is not adequate. Parents having to fundraise for the essentials to ensure the education of their children reminds me of when my children were at primary school: we had to fundraise then, back in the early 1990s—and we had a Tory Government then, too.

2.12 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): There is a real sense of déjà vu about this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) had a debate on 24 October, as she said, and there was an estimates day debate on 26 February and then another debate on 4 March, after the big petition. Like my hon. Friend, I spoke in all those debates, but the situation remains the same, so I pay tribute to her perseverance. I also pay tribute to all our teachers for the huge challenge that they face. Hopefully, they are currently busy nurturing our pupils, not neutering them, as my hon. Friend suggested earlier.

I shall pick up where I left off: the last time around in Westminster Hall, I was rudely interrupted after just four minutes of speaking. I had generously given way to

interventions, only for the scorers not to credit me with the extra injury time. I am happy to take interventions this time, if the scorers are awake. At that time, I described the funding crisis in schools as a national emergency; alas, nothing has changed. West Sussex was at the bottom of the fourth quartile for funding; after the changes to the national funding formula, we are still in the bottom quartile. That is why, of the 25,222 responses to the consultation on the fair funding formula, no less than 9% were representations from West Sussex. Although I cannot speak for the Minister, who is also a West Sussex MP, I can, then, speak for my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and other West Sussex MPs.

As I have said before, I went to see all the headteachers—I got them all together—and all the chairs of governors in my constituency so that they could give me real-life examples of the funding challenges facing them now. They did not give scare stories or tell me about prospective challenges, but told me about what they are facing now. As a result of that, I wrote an eight-page letter to the Secretary of State to set out many of the problems, to which I shall refer in a moment.

First, let me mention two new things. I was recently asked to go and see some nursery school providers in my constituency. I thought I was meeting two or three, but 50 turned up. There are serious problems with how the 30 hours' funded childcare—it is not free but funded—is being reimbursed to independent nurseries. Some 81% of children in non-domestic settings are in independent nurseries, of which 90% say that the reimbursement does not cover the full costs of that provision. Many are at risk of having to turn away some of the most deprived families. Nursery closures were up 66% in the past year and 5,000 places have been lost. It is a false economy not to fund important pre-school settings properly.

Secondly, the Minister might want to comment on the future of the pupil premium in the light of a report from the Sutton Trust. Will we make sure that the pupil premium is part of the new funding round? There are concerns that increasingly the pupil premium is being used, particularly in the more deprived schools, to plug gaps in the school budget, rather than to fund the pupils who specifically need it.

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend was a brilliant children's Minister and knows an enormous amount about this subject. He mentioned the pupil premium; does he agree that how it is used should be much more accountable? The Government need to look into whether it is working and how the money is being spent, because it should be spent on the most disadvantaged pupils.

Tim Loughton: That is absolutely right. Before my right hon. Friend became its Chair, the Education Committee did a report and found out that the pupil premium was not going to those pupils for whom it was absolutely intended, and for whom it was absolutely essential to make sure that they could close the gap with the children who did not qualify for it.

Another issue that I wish to raise with the Minister again—I did not get a proper reply the previous time—is the justification for schools having to fund out of their own budget the 2% pay rise in salaries this year. That is a significant hit on our schools. In February, the Government said in their paper on school costs that

schools could be far more efficient and save a lot of money if they had better procurement methods, but the trouble is that in many of my local schools the staffing budget now accounts for something like 90% of the school budget. The savings the Government describe can be made only against soft costs, which are going up by 2% because of the salary award. I really do want an explanation of how the Department expects schools to pick up the bill for that additional 2% out of school funding, given all the other competing challenges they have.

Let me refer to a few of the points that came out of my roundtable meetings in my constituency. Shortfalls are being clawed back by reducing staffing costs, which in some cases account for 90% of a school's budget, as I said. In one medium-sized primary school, teaching assistant support has been reduced by more than 200 hours. The school has reduced its budget for continuing personal development training for staff, and its inclusion co-ordinator has not been replaced.

At a junior school, the professional development budget, which in previous years was between £3,500 and £5,000, is now zero. The extended curriculum budget, which was between £19,000 and £20,000 in previous years, is now £500. The learning resources budget, which was up to £120,000, is now just £35,000.

At a medium-sized primary school in my constituency, high-level teaching assistants are being used to cover classes so that the school can cut supply-staff costs. The school is unable to pay overtime. Counselling levels have fallen, which I am particularly concerned about. We know about the support that school-age children need because of the pressures on mental health from social media, peer pressure and other things. If we do not have that in-school support, it will be a false economy because the children involved will not be able or prepared to take advantage of their education.

There are real problems in special schools. This year, there will be at least nine more pupils at one special school in my constituency than there were in the previous year, but there will be no additional teaching staff. These are specialist schools with high-demand pupils getting no more teaching staff to help to look after them.

A secondary academy in my constituency has had to narrow the curriculum on offer to cut costs. The school is unable to meet the demand for counselling—there is currently a four-month waiting list. A small primary school is reducing swimming lessons and music lessons. All these are real-life examples of the effect of this funding now. It is essential that the comprehensive spending review this year does something about this situation urgently.

2.18 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). I declare an interest: I come from a family of teachers, including a niece, who is still teaching.

As far as I know, no politician ever got elected saying, "I want to spend less money on schools," but that is what we got. I am sure the Minister will tell us that the Government are spending more than ever on education, and of course that is true in cash terms, but as well as being able to add up, my constituents can do long division and they can observe what is happening in schools.

[Thangam Debbonaire]

The Minister may wish to disagree with my arithmetic, or that of headteachers in Bristol, but I wonder whether he will accept that the chair of the UK Statistics Authority and the Institute for Fiscal Studies can do their numbers. Sir David Norgrove, chair of the UK Statistics Authority, said last October in a letter to the Secretary of State, in response to a blog by the Department for Education about education funding, that

“figures were presented in such a way as to misrepresent changes in school funding...school spending figures were exaggerated by using a truncated axis, and by not adjusting for per pupil spend.”

Those are not my words; they are the words of the chair of the UK Statistics Authority. He also noted that the Department

“included a wide range of education expenditure unrelated to publicly funded schools”.

In his response, the Secretary of State said that his Department was looking into the issues and admitted that “pupil numbers are rising” and that

“we are asking schools to do more and schools are facing cost pressures”,

but that is precisely my point.

I have made the point several times in this place, including to the Prime Minister, that if we increase cash funding but costs and pupil numbers rise as well, we will quickly get, in effect, a real-terms cut, and that is where we are. National insurance, teacher pay and pensions, the apprenticeship levy, rising pupil numbers, rising levels of special needs—these are all increased costs. However, as other services are cut, such as mental health support and youth work, schools are forced to try to step into the breach, but again without the money. They are being held responsible for just about every other social problem, so more pressures on and more cuts to other local services lead to more yet costs to schools—a real-terms cut.

In my constituency, Redland Green School has said that special educational needs

“are getting greater but are not being matched with funding”.

The school also told me that it cannot refer students to childhood mental health services unless they have seen a school counsellor, but there is no funding for the school counsellor. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found last year that total spending per pupil fell by about 8% or about £500 per pupil between 2009-10 and 2017-18. The effects of those cuts—and yes, they are cuts—is that schools have been forced to cut to the bone and beyond. Schools in Bristol West have told me about cuts to support staff, cuts to learning support staff, increases in class sizes and cuts to the curriculum. They have told me that they have had to cut languages and creative subjects, as well as politics, which frankly I deeply deprecate. I do not think they should have to.

St Bonaventure's School has told me of fears of its reading recovery scheme being cut, and St John's Primary School has had to cut a successful maths intervention. There is no money to fund professional development and training, and replacing teaching staff now routinely involves sacrificing quality for lower pay offers. It is not that the teachers are not good; they just are not as experienced, and that is not good enough. Parents, children, teachers and other school staff in Bristol West tell me that schools are being forced to do very much more with very much less money, and that is not okay.

When this Government cut education, they limit life chances. When they fail to care for children's mental health, they build up problems for the future. And when they hold schools responsible for just about everything and fund them only to the bare minimum or less, we all lose out. Among the pupils at St Bonaventure's, St John's, Cotham and all the other schools in my constituency, there might be one who is going to invent a cost-effective way of making tidal power work and fuel us all for the future so that we can give up fossil fuels, or a cure for cancer. In fact, I discovered recently that, thanks to an outstanding science project, some pupils at Cotham School are working on exactly that.

Compounding all that is this Government's utter shamelessness. As the chair of the UK Statistics Authority and the Institute for Fiscal Studies have said, school funding is being cut, and this Government will not admit it. I said earlier that no politician got elected saying that they were going to spend less, but that is what is happening. This country needs a different Government. It needs a Labour Government who will put the education, care and mental health of children and young people at the top of their list, along with tackling climate change. For the children of Bristol West, that cannot come a moment too soon.

2.23 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): The flaws in the old school funding system are well known, and it is clear that the new fairer funding formula addresses many of those issues. There was a distinct sense of a postcode lottery, with the cash value assigned to what a child and their education deserves being tied as much to their geography as to their ability or needs. The fact that five of the 10 most cash-rich schools in the country are in Tower Hamlets shows the uneven concentration of resources in certain geographical areas.

The new formula represents the greatest leap forward in school funding for a generation and was backed with an additional £1.3 billion in investment above and beyond previously agreed spending plans. The new formula means that the amount allocated to schools better reflects the needs and characteristics of individual schools and their pupils. I am grateful that my area of South Gloucestershire received an additional £8 million as a result of the new formula—one of the largest increases in the country—and that our total education budget now stands at around £208 million. As well as what central Government are doing, I welcome the news that the Conservative administration on South Gloucestershire Council has announced plans to invest an additional £78 million in school buildings, including providing a brand-new primary school, two new special schools and money for new windows, heating systems and roofs. In addition, it is making available £100,000 in match funding to double the spending power of the “Friends of” groups in schools to help them to deliver projects.

However, I also recognise that, more often than not, there are no easy answers in politics and there are issues that remain to be addressed. I am concerned that, despite a large increase, South Gloucestershire has now slipped to become the worst-funded education authority in the country, something that I do not feel is justified, given that there are places that are both more affluent and have better school performance. In recent weeks I have met my right hon. Friend the Minister for Schools

Standards, who offered some constructive ways forward to address my concerns and later visited Patchway Community School in my constituency, where three of my children went, to see the reality on the ground in the lowest-funded authority in the country. It is a school in great disrepair that needs additional investment and quite a bit of work to say the least. I am heartened that the Government are listening carefully and taking seriously the issues raised with them, not only by me but by other colleagues in this House and the f40 group.

One thing that is rightly being brought under closer scrutiny is the salaries for senior leadership in academy trusts. The Public Accounts Committee alluded to that in its March 2018 report on academy schools' finances. One of its conclusions reads:

"Some academy trusts appear to be using public money to pay excessive salaries...Unjustifiably high salaries use public money that could be better spent on improving children's education and supporting frontline teaching staff, and do not represent value for money. If the payment of such high salaries remains unchallenged, it is more likely that such high salaries become accepted as indicative of the market rate. This could then distort the employment market in the sector for senior staff."

I am particularly concerned that trusts such as the Olympus Academy Trust in my area are asking for donations and contributions from parents towards the most basic supplies, such as textbooks, while their chief executives are taking home in their pension contributions what some parents earn in a year, let alone their six-figure salaries, which continue to balloon.

Dave Baker, the chief executive of the Olympus Academy Trust, now earns up to £125,000, having been awarded a pay rise of between £5,000 and £10,000 last year, putting him £10,000 above the benchmarking suggested for a CEO of a trust the size of Olympus in the Kreston report, published in January, and that does not include his pension contribution of up to £20,000. Shortly before the 2017 general election, he announced the possibility of going to a four-day week, cutting classroom support and restricting the curriculum for the over 6,400 students in his care. That caused significant distress and upset among many parents in my area.

It is important to get school funding right, and it is a work in progress at governmental level. However, the image of school executives on bumper wage packets that dwarf what most people can ever hope to earn presenting begging bowls to parents who are just about managing leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of my constituents and is engendering understandable anger among them. I would like to see greater transparency and accountability for excessive executive salaries, and I am encouraged by the Government's stance on challenging academies to justify high salaries. I have submitted a freedom of information request to the Olympus Academy Trust for the full details of all remuneration packages for members of staff at the trust earning more than £100,000 per annum. It is important that those taking large salaries from the public purse offer value for money to the taxpayer and deliver stellar outcomes for the next generation. I ask that the Government continue their approach of challenging and scrutinising academies to ensure that that is the case.

2.28 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I think it is pretty clear to most in and outside this Chamber how I feel about the current crisis in our education system.

What I do not want to hear from the Government is that school spending has never been higher. It is just not true. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has stated that school funding per pupil fell by 8% in real terms between 2010 and 2018, while post-16 education has seen a 20% fall.

Pupil numbers in secondary education are rising, and the number of secondary school students is due to rise by 14.7% by 2027. Costs have been rising and are continuing to rise—teachers' pensions, national insurance contributions and the apprenticeship levy to name but a few. Only two schools in my constituency of Colne Valley have not experienced a shortfall in funding since 2015. Over two thirds of schools in Colne Valley have seen a cut to funding of more than £150 per pupil since 2015, and seven have lost over £400 per pupil.

The Sutton Trust has found that over two thirds of secondary school heads have said that financial pressures have forced them to cut staff. Schools are shortening the school week, and literally turning the lights off. Teachers are paying for classroom resources out of their own money. Our school buildings have leaking roofs, and buckets are placed around the building to collect drips from the leaks. It is just shameful.

The curriculum is also being squeezed. The Fabian Society has revealed a drastic decline in arts provision in our primary schools. The Sixth Form Colleges Association has uncovered that 50% of schools and colleges have dropped A-level courses in modern foreign languages. Research by Sussex University found that the number of schools offering music A-level had fallen by more than 15% in the past two years. A narrow curriculum limits children's opportunities, and their ability to adapt and engage in different types of learning.

Support for pupils is also struggling to survive the budget cuts. Colne Valley headteachers have told me that funding pressures have led to cuts in learning resources, staffing, and provision for special education needs and disabilities. As the Education Committee found when taking evidence during the inquiry into SEND, schools and local authorities are struggling to provide the necessary support, causing stress for pupils and their families, and demand is growing. And here's the thing: this debate is about school and college funding, but the problems we are seeing in the system are not just about the lack of sufficient funding in schools. It is about schools picking up the cost of a near decade of cuts to public health, youth services, community outreach, early intervention services and housing benefit, and the roll-out of universal credit.

Between 2010 and 2020, local authorities will have seen reductions of £16 billion to core Government funding. Inevitably, this causes a reduction of provision in areas such as social care and support for families, and for agencies such as the police force. Schools are having to divert the scarce resources they have to cover for services that no longer have the capacity to provide the support so desperately needed by young people and their families. Schools are the hub of our communities. They are on the frontline every day. I know; I have been there. They support our youngest and most vulnerable. We need well trained, motivated and passionate teachers who believe in the common purpose of preparing children and young people for life and the love of lifelong learning.

[*Thelma Walker*]

The gravity of the situation is only too clear to many of us here. For the first time, thousands of headteachers marched on Westminster, hundreds of maintained nursery staff marched on Westminster, teaching unions are united and marching on Westminster, and parents, teachers and governors are united and marching on Westminster. Listen to the professionals. Listen to the parents. Take action now. Everyone is related in some way to a teacher or has children in school. These people can see the system as it is at the moment, and they will be using their vote in the next election, whenever that may be. It will be education, and our country's respect and value for it, that will help to return the Labour party to government.

2.33 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and others on securing this debate.

Let me first acknowledge the efforts that preceding Conservative-led Governments have made over the past decade, constantly increasing the schools block budget. Funding for our children's primary and secondary schools has gone up from £30.4 billion in 2010 to £43.5 billion for next year—a £13 billion increase. Since 2010, more children are in good or outstanding schools, the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils has been lowered, and there are tens of thousands more teachers and teaching assistants. However, funding is only one measure. Schools are performing so much better than before, but I must recognise concerns raised by my local headteachers and parents about available funding, as schools are having to meet costs that they never did before, and I am speaking today to give them a voice in this Chamber.

The Library estimates that my constituency has benefited from a 6% real-terms increase to the schools block funding since 2013, from £57 million to £61 million. This is good news, but per pupil funding has gone down, indicating that there are more pupils than before. There is more money, but it is being thinly spread, and this is one reason that school budgets are under more pressure.

Locally, headteachers at Helena Romanes School, Saffron Walden County High School and Joyce Frankland Academy, among others, have told me about the issues that they and their staff are facing. These issues include more lessons being taught with fewer teachers, as those who retire from the profession are not replaced; schools having to rely on donations from generous parents and carers for extracurricular clubs; stopping the late school bus service; and simply not having enough resources. Additionally, although school spending has increased since the end of the last decade and now stands at just under £5,100 per pupil, reductions to sixth-form funding and local authority services have affected budgets and provisions for school transport and pastoral care. Teachers in my constituency continue to do fantastic work despite these pressures, because they are motivated first and foremost by giving children the best possible education.

I know that the Minister acknowledges the hard work of teachers across the country, and ask him also to recognise the passion shown by my local teaching staff and to help support them by taking into account our rise in pupil numbers when considering funding allocations. More still needs to be done, but I appreciate that the

Government have already taken positive steps to bridge current funding gaps, which is encouraging. Earlier this month, the Secretary of State wrote to colleagues to confirm that the Government would be funding all state-funded schools, further education and sixth-form colleges to cover increased employee contributions in the teachers' pension scheme, helping to relieve pressure on schools. This is a measure that I personally lobbied for, so I thank the Government.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Like my hon. Friend, I am an Essex MP, and like her, I have heard concerns from my local headteachers about funding. Does she agree that the national funding formula is a necessary reform, but that we need to put more money into it at the spending review this year to ensure that more school pupils benefit?

Mrs Badenoch: My hon. Friend makes a very good point; I agree with him completely.

Just over 13,000 new school places have been added in Essex, alongside seven new free schools and a further eight schools to follow. There is a need for more funding, as my local schools have called for, and I am pleased that the Government have already started to account for this. Over the next two years, total funding in the county will rise by £48.7 million to £855.8 million. This is welcome news and demonstrates continued progress under this Government to improve the quality of teaching.

The Government have a record to be proud of, as 90% of children in Essex attend schools rated good or outstanding, compared to 67% in 2010, and 66% of pupils are reaching the expected key stage 2 standard in reading and writing. [*Interruption.*] Opposition Members may laugh, but the truth is that it is not just about the money that is spent, but the outcomes that we measure, and we are doing very well on outcomes. We are asking schools to do much more than they ever have, and it is only right that we give them much more money to do so. I encourage Ministers to listen closely to my schools' funding concerns.

3.37 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): The pressures that schools face are growing. We know it across this House, and we hear it from heads, teachers and parents alike. The message—just like the message that many of us have heard about the climate crisis this week—could not be clearer. As some hon. Members have said already, the special educational needs of pupils are increasingly challenging. Heads have told me directly that they do not know how their secondaries will cope when the numbers of younger children who are now being diagnosed start to come through. I have heard estimates that genuinely shock me.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps worse than the headline figures—millions and billions of pounds—is the fact that a commonplace discussion with every single headteacher, when we visit schools every week, is how they are making fundamental cuts to their staffing, special needs and other budgets? Should not the Minister look at that?

Lyn Brown: I absolutely agree.

As many as a third of pupils in some local nursery classes are now thought to need some support. That is massive. In Newham, the challenge for schools is only

likely to get bigger. Hundreds of local children who need an education, health and care plan or a statement do not yet have one. Official statistics show that EHC plan and statement rates for Newham are currently five times lower than for any other inner-London borough. The council is working hard to turn this around, but these current low rates mean that the challenge for local schools is just beginning, and they are struggling to keep up. The funding for the specialist, trained support that large numbers of children now need simply is not there. The average funding available for each child with an EHC plan has fallen by a fifth over the past five years.

I want to raise just one example—I would have given many more if we had had longer. Adam is nine. He has complex behavioural and emotional challenges. He has an EHC plan and is supposed to receive speech and language therapy and psychological help. He simply does not get it. The support services have been cut far too much. Most of the speech and language staff are now temporary or agency workers, so there is no consistency, and there are long gaps in Adam's access to services. Cuts to the psychological services mean he has not had any of the support he needs for his emotional and behavioural challenges, and his ability to learn and grow as a healthy member of his community will obviously be hugely affected.

Adam's primary school in Newham has got to the point where it simply cannot meet his needs. Between 2015 and 2018, it lost more than £100,000 from its budget every single year—more than £400 for every pupil. How foolish will Adam's generation think we were because we did not invest in them or him and left his and their potential unfulfilled? Like climate change, this is an issue where we are letting our children down. What kind of country are we living in?

The achievements of Newham's young people are extraordinary, given the circumstances, and our teachers are amazing—I see it on so many school visits—but the achievements of our children are made against the odds, despite the barriers and with no thanks to this Government, who will have cut Newham's schools by £37.5 million since 2015—a cut of £445 for each and every pupil. The Government need to wake up to the long-term damage they are doing. They need to give Newham's schools and other schools the funding they need to keep up with rising pupil numbers and inflation, to reduce the impacts of the poverty and inequalities their policies are increasing and to pay for proper support so that pupils with increasing needs can fulfil their potential as well.

2.42 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I represent parts of West Berkshire Council area and parts of Wokingham Borough Council area. Both councils face exactly the same problems with schools. In both cases, we receive very low amounts per pupil compared with the national average, so we cannot provide as varied or as richly resourced a curriculum as better-endowed schools.

The biggest problem we face, which I hope the Minister and his colleagues will address urgently, is on high needs. It should be the area we are keenest to help on. The pupils who require that special support need to be properly supported financially from the centre, as well as supported by local professionals. In West Berkshire,

I am advised that there will be over 9% more pupils needing that support this year but that its budget has gone up by 0.5%. How does the Minister think we will manage to pay for all those extra pupils who need that extra support when the budget is so meanly set?

In Wokingham, too, there is quite rapid growth in the numbers requiring support and very little growth in the money being made available. Wokingham has the additional problem that because we are an extremely fast-growing part of the country—we are taking a large number of new houses—we are way behind in putting in the necessary educational provision for special needs, so Wokingham now has to find facilities for 119 special needs pupils outside the borough because nobody has bothered to make the money available so that we can catch up. It would be better, and probably better value, if more of that provision could be local, close to where the children and their parents live, but this is not an option, given the delay.

I have raised with the Minister before the issue of general schools funding, which has been made more difficult by the rapid growth in pupil numbers. I am pleased to say that we now have a new secondary school and three new primary schools, which have gone in relatively recently to catch up with the backlog in the provision of places for this very fast-growing part of the country. That creates its own financial problems, however, which the Minister and his system do not recognise. First, there is a delay in getting the money in for the new schools as the provision goes in, so the budgets of the other schools are squeezed.

Secondly, when we at last get a new secondary school, for example, it makes a lot of places available all in one go, because it establishes itself with a certain capacity, and then pupils are attracted to that school—perfectly reasonably—and are taken away from other schools, and those schools then face an immediate cut in the amount of money they have, because suddenly they do not have the right number of pupils to sustain the budgets. It takes time to slim down their offer, and sometimes it is very painful and difficult, but again the system is simply too inflexible to recognise this basic requirement of the system.

If it means that we have a few more places to give parents more choice, that is good, but I am a realist—you have to pay for it, Minister. We expect the Minister to do so, representing as he does a Government who say they believe in parental choice and high standards for pupils in state schools. That is something the Minister and I entirely agree about. If I am ever tempted to give a talk to or visit an independent school, and if I go to the really well-endowed ones, I see a different world in terms of the library resources, the range of curriculum offers, the sporting facilities and the support they get—because money does buy something better. I want the pupils who go to state schools in West Berkshire and Wokingham to have access to the best, but we simply cannot do that on the current budget.

Minister, the Government should stop trying to give £39 billion to the European Union to delay our exit for two to four years, when the public voted to get out. Let us get hold of the money, Minister, and put it where it matters: into social care and schools and into tax cuts for hard-pressed families so they can provide more for their own children. That is what the public want. Get on with it, Minister!

2.47 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): On 4 March, I had the great privilege to move the motion in Westminster Hall on e-petition 232220 on schools funding. The debate was packed and lively, as we heard earlier, with many hon. Members sharing the difficulties their local schools were facing due to insufficient funding.

It was a particular privilege for me because the petition was started by Mr Andrew Ramanandi, the headteacher of St Joseph's Primary School in Blaydon, and signed by over 3,300 people from my constituency and other parts of the country. It was built on a campaign that started with a letter co-signed by headteachers of primary, secondary and SEND schools in Gateshead who had become increasingly alarmed by the impact that a real-terms reduction in schools funding was having on the children and young people in their care. The letter, which was sent to parents before Christmas and informed them that schools may no longer be able to provide the same level of education, asked them for their support in raising their concerns with the Government.

Seventy-one out of 76 schools in Gateshead borough are facing real-terms reductions in funding. At the same time, costs—as we have heard—are rising, and so are pupil numbers in Gateshead, as elsewhere in the country. The Government's own statistics show that England's schools have 137,000 more pupils in the system and the Institute for Fiscal Studies acknowledged that schools have suffered an 8% real-terms reduction in spending per pupil despite growing numbers of pupils coming through the doors. With increasing numbers of pupils and decreasing funding in real terms, schools have had to make cuts in staffing as well as in all budget areas, looking for greater efficiencies in supplies and services. Headteachers in my constituency tell me that, as funding has become tighter, schools have had to cut back on essential resources—teaching and non-teaching staff, support staff who work with vulnerable pupils, small group work and interventions with children who are not thriving, teaching resources, subject choices, classroom and extracurricular activities, repairs to buildings and renewal of equipment.

In preparation for the debate, I visited several schools across Blaydon. At one of them, Portobello Primary School in Birtley, the headteacher and governors of that great community school talked to me about their concerns about funding pressures. They told me that in the last year they have lost four valuable members of staff to redundancy, including a higher level teaching assistant with 20 years' experience in early years; an experienced teacher who led on the arts curriculum; a highly skilled teaching assistant trained in supporting children with medical and educational needs; and a dedicated school counsellor who supported young children with their mental health. They also said that the impact of real-terms budget reductions has made it harder to deliver specific interventions with pupils; it is increasingly difficult to provide the personal and emotional support for vulnerable pupils; they have lost decades' worth of experience and curriculum knowledge; and they are finding it harder and harder to take children on educational visits and to purchase up-to-date teaching resources and equipment.

I mentioned Mr Andrew Ramanandi of St Joseph's Primary School, where the children are bright, interested and have clearly been taught to have inquiring minds.

He told me that the day after the recent debate he had to tell his staff about the outcome of the redundancy consultation he had to carry out. I caught up with him earlier this week to find out about what happened. He told me that 19 morning sessions and four afternoon sessions now have no learning support in the classroom. He has had to lose a day's PPA cover by a qualified teacher who can deliver specialist curriculum. He has had to stop whole class brass and percussion music lessons. The school is oversubscribed so it is not about fewer pupils: it is that the school has had to bear the brunt of inflation and increased on-costs. Mr Ramanandi said that they are expecting an Ofsted inspection from September onwards under the new framework, which will be looking at the quality of curriculum. However, due to funding problems, he has had to make decisions on redundancies and spending that will potentially stop the school from being outstanding.

I could go on, but I will finish by saying that headteachers, teachers, parents and governors across Blaydon all want the Minister to provide higher funding—fair funding—for schools, for our children and young people and so do I. I hope that the Minister will be able today, almost eight weeks after the Westminster Hall debate, to give us all that assurance.

2.52 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair today.

Investment in education is one of my priorities for North Cornwall and of special interest to me personally as a champion of social mobility. North Cornwall is a prime example of an area that has been historically overlooked compared with urban areas by Governments of all colours over the past 50 years, to the detriment of the life chances of children and young people who grow up in that beautiful part of the country.

The London challenge policy saw a huge investment in urban areas in 2003. Although it is difficult to isolate the impact of the policy, it is undeniable that attainment levels went up when the overall funding packages were introduced in those areas. The policy saw a budget of £40 million a year for London, Greater Manchester and the Black Country at its peak. My issue is that the children of Lanivet, Launceston and Bodmin could and should have had the same resources at the same time, and would have benefited from the uplift.

I mention the London challenge because despite the policy coming to an end there is still a huge disparity between education investment in urban and in rural areas. Cornwall is part of a group of 42 local authorities that have historically received some of the lowest allocations for primary and secondary pupils across the country. I am taking part in this debate on behalf of some of the headteachers who have spoken to me about their concerns.

Tim Loughton: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the London challenge. It was a very successful investment, but its legacy is the huge gap in per capita funding for pupils in our constituencies. Does he agree that coastal constituencies such as his and mine, where there are pockets of deprivation, need a similar scheme to recognise the deprivation alongside the advantage, just as happened in London, but in a different way?

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Rural deprivation is very much harder to differentiate. Urban deprivation tends to be easier to identify. Rural deprivation definitely exists and should be recognised in the funding formula.

Cornwall is one of the most beautiful places to raise a child. It is safe and has a uniquely beautiful landscape. Children are really lucky to grow up there. However, I believe that, when it comes to education, they have been short-changed over the years. Having been a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Treasury, I understand the cost pressures of maintaining stable economic policy, ensuring stable growth and limiting borrowing, allowing us to live within our means, but if there is one sector that needs urgent investment and a spending review, Minister, it is your Department—further education, secondary education and primary education. That means revisiting some of the policies that we have looked at previously: the minimum per pupil funding levels, the 0.5% funding floor and the historic differences for the schools that have been comparatively well-funded over several decades. Moreover, there is an issue with the use of historic averages, which locks in the disparity gap between the highest-funded and lowest-funded state schools, which can be between 50% and 70%. Cornwall's schools are particularly penalised, which is unfair.

For me, it is simply a question of fairness—fairness for taxpayers, fairness for teachers, and fairness for children and young people. Parents in North Cornwall pay the same level of tax pro rata as parents in cities, yet historically their children have received only half the educational investment from the state that pupils in urban areas have. Although the fair funding mechanisms have helped, the rebalancing is not happening fast enough; it needs to happen much faster.

As I mentioned, one of my passions, which pushed me to stand for election, is social mobility. More parity and fairness in the education system will allow social mobility to increase in North Cornwall. I cannot stand here and argue for social mobility while that disparity exists. More investment leads to higher attainment and provides teachers with the resources they need to teach their pupils. With the extra funding that went into London, with the larger budgets, those attainment gaps shrank. In an increasingly technologically based jobs market, rural pupils need to have the same level of funding to obtain the same level of skills needed to fit into that marketplace. They need to be given the fairest deal they can from this Government to develop their academic and vocational skills. North Cornwall's pupils are no less talented, aspirational, ambitious or intelligent than pupils from urban areas, but they have historically received less funding from every colour of Government in the last 50 years. That needs to change. We need a fairer national funding formula that is not based on disparity between urban and rural areas, but unlocks the talent of every child in this country.

On behalf of schools in North Cornwall, I am asking for a fairer deal, Minister; and to show confidence in our young people in North Cornwall it is a question of not simply more investment after years of sustained economic and budgetary growth, but a reallocation of funds across the whole area, ensuring that every pupil, no matter where they live, from Cornwall to Scotland and everywhere in between, is treated in exactly the same way.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that schools in rural areas such as mine should get a fairer deal in the spending review. I urge the Minister to strengthen every sinew when he speaks to the Treasury.

2.57 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), not least because I was the Minister for Schools when we introduced the London challenge. It is worth reminding the House that, prior to the London challenge, the performance of London schools was below the national average, even though their funding was above the national average—so the improvement was not simply a consequence of the London challenge. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to speak up for rural and coastal schools. The suggestion of a coastal challenge, similar to the London challenge, is welcome and I would be delighted to support it.

Investment in education is crucial for social justice, for tackling inequality and poverty and, of course, for our national economic future. When Labour took office in 1997, UK public spending on education as a proportion of GDP was at its lowest since the early 1960s; we lagged behind many European neighbours and other advanced economies. By 2010 we had overtaken key countries such as Germany, Switzerland and Australia, delivering real change with smaller classes, modern school buildings, higher per pupil funding and a big increase in the numbers of teachers and support staff. Yet since 2010, that progress has been reversed. Education spending as a share of national income has fallen from 5.8% to 4.3%. That is a shocking decline in our national investment in education.

In Liverpool, the council expects 16 schools that are currently in surplus to go into deficit and 24 schools to go further into deficit. Despite the funding challenges that schools across my constituency face, the situation would be much worse if it were not for the pupil premium. The pupil premium was a welcome initiative introduced by the coalition, aimed at improving opportunities for children from the poorest backgrounds. However, headteachers are increasingly saying to me and to other Members, as we have heard today, that they have no alternative but to use pupil premium cash to offset budget cuts elsewhere.

The head of St Margaret's Anfield Church of England Primary School told me this week:

"without pupil premium I would be unable to deliver an effective curriculum and a safe working environment."

I am particularly concerned that the children who most need extra support are bearing the brunt of changes. The head of St Paul and St Timothy's Catholic Infant School told me:

"it is the most vulnerable children in our schools who are suffering the most as a result of this funding crisis."

I want to echo what the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) said about high-needs funding. According to analysis by the Institute for Public Policy Research, in north-west England, funding per eligible child through the high-needs block has fallen in the last five years by 24%—a quarter of the funding cut. Liverpool forecasts a budget deficit in that block of more than £3 million.

[Stephen Twigg]

Bank View High School, a great special school in my constituency for students with complex learning difficulties, has seen an increase in its pupil numbers from 160 to 200. Next door is Redbridge High School, which caters for children with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning disabilities. It has also experienced an increasing number of pupils, yet it does not have the funding to match the demand. The head tells me that, as a result, the school has had to make cuts.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that a fundamental point, which I have raised with the Minister on a number of occasions, is that too much of the funding does not reach the schools but gets stuck somewhere on the way? We have to make sure that the funding is in the schools.

Stephen Twigg: I absolutely agree.

Despite the challenging environment that Bank View and Redbridge schools face, I am delighted that have they have again been ranked outstanding by Ofsted. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate both schools on that fantastic achievement.

Schools in Liverpool are highly dependent on the minimum funding guarantee, but that has not been confirmed beyond 2020-21. As the Chair of the Education Committee rightly said, schools need long-term certainty. Another headteacher has raised the issue of having to put forward three-year budget plans without confirmation of future funding arrangements due to the delay in the comprehensive spending review. Surely the message of this debate is that education deserves the same kind of long-term planning that we see for our health system.

I thank all the teachers and support staff who work so hard and go above and beyond. The headteacher of Clifford Holroyde School, Jane Pepa, said to me:

"I have spent large amounts of my time seeing how we can do more with less, applying for grants to keep us afloat and even selling Christmas trees to try to generate funding."

The burden should not be on headteachers such as Jane to do that. As the Government expect more from our schools, they need to back that up with significant increases in funding and resources. We need a serious, long-term settlement for schools funding.

3.3 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Primary and secondary schools across my constituency provide a commendably high standard of education. In the Cheshire East local authority area, 87% of children now attend schools rated good or outstanding, compared with 73% in 2010. Of course, much of the credit for that goes to dedicated staff in schools and strong leadership by headteachers, but as Education Ministers will know from a dialogue we have been having for some years, those same headteachers say that that is in spite of acute funding pressures.

To be fair, I want to thank Education Ministers and the Minister for School Standards in particular for having listening ears. Two years ago, they raised per-pupil funding in senior schools to £4,800, which was the exact amount that headteachers in my constituency requested. Total funding for Cheshire East schools is rising by £10.4 million over 2018-20, but that figure factors in increased pupil numbers, which are disproportionately

high, due to the high number of new house builds. Yes, an additional £1.6 million of high needs funding has been added for the same two years, but this is woefully insufficient to meet current additional needs, causing distress, as I have seen in my surgeries, to parents, pupils and teachers. Yes, an additional £3.8 million of funding has been added through the growth, premises and mobility factors of the national funding formula in 2019-20, and an additional £10.4 million of pupil premium funding will be received by schools as a result of that having been introduced, as we have heard, by the coalition Government. I recognise all this, but headteachers repeatedly tell me that they simply cannot provide the level of education they aspire to due to funding pressures. One wrote to me:

"The parlous funding situation which envelops us is a depressingly serious threat to the breadth, range and quality of education that we are able to offer."

I want to thank the Secretary of State for Education for writing to me just last week, acknowledging that

"I very much recognise the financial constraints that schools face."

He added that

"there is clearly much more still to do."

I hope Ministers will take away from this debate the points raised by colleagues across the House. If the spending review is the key determinant of spending for the Government, I hope this debate will strengthen Education Ministers' arms—because I do believe that they have listening ears—in setting out a strong case for much improved education funding, and will open the Treasury's eyes and ears to what is being said in this Chamber today. In one of the debates on this subject in which I spoke not long ago—it was about eight weeks ago in Westminster Hall—I said, very politely and courteously, that we actually had the wrong Minister in front of us, and I still think that that is the case today. We need a Treasury Minister in front of us, and perhaps we need to think about a creative title for a debate on school funding that will ensure that happens.

In closing, may I raise the three points that headteacher Ed O'Neill of Eaton Bank Academy wrote to me about? Following another debate—a Westminster Hall debate—I spoke in, he wanted to comment on three issues arising from the Minister's response to that debate. First, he said the Minister made

"no mention of the ludicrous situation of 'short termism' in financial planning."

We have heard about this already in the Chamber today. He went on:

"This position is untenable for schools. As school leaders we need to have a greater degree of certainty over the longer term health of school finances so that we can budget and plan accordingly."

Secondly, he said:

"No matter what the over-arching increase that is quoted from the DfE, the funding is not good enough. From a secondary school perspective, the variance between KS3 and KS4...weightings needs changing. It is no less challenging to provide for a student aged 11-14 than...for a student aged 14-16"

and

"the allocation to KS3 pupils...needs to be significantly improved."

Thirdly, he said:

"The poor funding for post 16 students is crippling provision and opportunity."

He also said that

"post 16 education is desperately underfunded. Added to the additional and historic financial underfunding pressures schools in Cheshire East face, school Sixth Forms are struggling to

maintain viability. It is a very real possibility that schools across the...Borough will fairly quickly be forced to start closing down their Sixth Form provision."

3.8 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Our schools are facing a crisis in funding, and unless immediate action is taken, irreversible damage will be done to our children's education. In the Westminster Hall debate on school funding on 4 March, the Minister for School Standards regaled us with how much money the Government had given to schools on a per-pupil basis and suggested that the Department for Education helps schools to make savings on non-staffing spend and advertising vacancies, but this fundamentally fails to understand the problem.

The Minister is ignoring the hard facts that schools face on the ground. The additional costs that schools are facing for energy, increases in national insurance contributions, pension obligations, pay rises and the apprenticeship levy—the last four are directly the effect of Government policy—mean that any additional funding schools may receive goes nowhere near covering what schools have had taken from them. It is like pouring a cup of water into a bucket having previously drilled three large holes in the bottom. In addition, the new school funding formula means that some schools are losing out, and if the Minister does not believe me, he should listen to the headteachers.

Kate Baptiste, headteacher of St Monica's Catholic Primary School in my constituency, told me:

"we are currently facing a deficit of just over £130,000. This is going to mean drastic cuts to staffing...We will lose support staff as well. This in turn will affect standards...High needs funding is also dire. We do not receive the full funding for children with an Education, Health and Care Plan...we do not receive the first £6,000 for each plan..."

At St Michael at Bowes Church of England Junior School in my constituency—the school I attended as a child and where I am a governor—headteacher Maria Jay and the governors are looking at making changes to the school day because the dedicated schools grant has not increased, and per-pupil funding has not increased in line with inflation. There have also been significant increases in pension and national insurance contributions.

The National Education Union has provided me with statistics from the Department for Education that show that the annual funding shortfall for schools in Enfield Southgate between 2015-2016 and 2018-2019 was £4,154,554, or a 7% cut. It is not only schools in my constituency that are affected. Two headteachers from schools in Hertfordshire also contacted me about school funding cuts in their area. Gillian Langan, headteacher of Abel Smith School, and Justine Page, headteacher of St Joseph's Catholic Primary School in Hertford, contacted me and said:

"In spite of the persistent and heroic efforts of school staff, these are desperate times and the funding crisis means that children's needs are no longer being met. Delivering an intense, academic National Curriculum at a time when teacher recruitment and retention is in crisis has undermined children's mental health and exploited children with special educational needs. This critical issue cannot be resolved without giving headteachers adequate funding that is ring fenced so that it goes directly into the classroom to provide urgently needed human and practical resources e.g. teachers, support staff and modern technology."

In research published last week, the Sutton Trust found that 69% of schools had to cut staff to save money, and that is on top of the fact that the UK is

facing a major issue with teacher recruitment and retention. Teach First's report, "Britain at a crossroads: what will it take to provide the teachers our children need?" states that currently one teacher is leaving the profession for every one that joins. We cannot afford to cut the numbers of the teachers we have. It is estimated that we will need an extra 47,000 secondary teachers and 8,000 primary teachers by 2024, just to maintain current pupil-teacher ratios. Teachers in more disadvantaged areas are over 70% more likely to leave than those in affluent areas. Between 2017 and 2027, the number of secondary school pupils is expected to grow by 15%, which means there will be 418,000 pupils in secondary schools by 2027. Unless more substantial investment goes into our schools, and soon, our school education system will fall apart.

Schools must have the resources to be modern workplaces that continue to develop employees throughout their careers, while allowing life beyond work. A vital part of that will be reducing overall workload, and paying teachers a salary that reflects their efforts, qualifications, and role in preparing the coming generations for life beyond school. In conclusion, I ask the Minister to look at the facts, and to meet me and headteachers from my local schools and go through their budgets. He should see with his own eyes the scale of the problem faced by schools, and take the urgent action needed to stop this crisis and fix the holes in the bucket.

3.13 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate. It is not the first time she has persisted in raising this issue. I intended to make some of these points during the debate on school funding on 4 March, but I was delayed and could not attend the opening speeches in Westminster Hall. Once I arrived I found that no seats were available and I could not even get in to sit down. The attendance of so many Members at that debate, and indeed on a Thursday afternoon, is testament to the concern that the issue of school funding is causing to so many of us and our communities.

I have raised this point with the Department before but it is worth repeating. More money has been invested in schools to promote standards, but the amount per pupil has declined because of the increased number of pupils on roll. In England, school block allocations per pupil have declined. In 2013-14 that allocation was £4,934 per pupil, but by 2018-19 that had declined to £4,694. As has been said, a report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies stated that real-terms funding for schools will have fallen by 6.5% between 2015 and 2020—the biggest fall in the past 30 years. In the London Borough of Barnet, in which the Hendon constituency is located, school block allocations per pupil have declined each year from £5,355 in 2013-14 to £4,887 in the last financial year.

Recently, I visited Copthall School for girls in Mill Hill. Three years ago it was a failing school, but with the introduction of a new headteacher and many new staff it has achieved a rapid transformation and been judged as good by Ofsted. Copthall is a science, technology, engineering, and maths—STEM—school. Very recently, year 11 pupils took part in a live operating theatre event where the girls were able to treat artificial cadavers and even operated on pigs' hearts and other organs to gain a lifelike experience of surgery, with a view to a medical career. That greatly impressed me. In some schools, such an

[Dr Matthew Offord]

event may be of little significance, but it was of huge significance for this school considering the social background of the pupils. More than half receive free school meals, English is the second language for 70% of the girls, and 80% are from an ethnic minority background.

However, the school faces difficult financial challenges. Copthall School's per pupil premium grant was £362,780 two years ago, but that was reduced to £359,957 last year. That is a real-terms decrease and a real problem for the finance committee. Total funding in 2018 was £6,309,710, but that is down £264,500 from the previous year. The school needs a new roof and a new heating system. The combined cost would be over £1 million. The school applied to Barnet Council for a funding grant, but was not successful. Even though it is a STEM school, its science laboratories are "woefully out of date", its IT equipment is dated and its library is passed its best. It is not the only school in my constituency having problems, but I raise the particular issues it is experiencing having recently spoken to Evelyn Forde, the headteacher, and Julia Blackman, the chairman of governors.

In the "Improving Education Standards" debate on 29 November, I acknowledged that the Government have increased the amount of money put into our nation's schools, but I also raised the issue of the increasing numbers of pupils being taught. That brings me back to the point being made by headteachers in my constituency that in real terms per-pupil funding has fallen. Planned savings by Barnet council have led to concerns from many headteachers in the Hendon constituency about the sustainability of their schools. Pressures include: increased pension and insurance costs, along with a pay rise for teachers; and cuts to special needs support, including therapy or inclusion services. That has led to some schools having to take various measures, including cutting staff, reducing the curriculum, increasing class sizes and not replacing equipment. And of course, the high cost of living in the borough makes it hard to attract staff. I have pointed that out repeatedly to the Department and have asked for the formula to be changed in relation to inner and outer-London boroughs.

In conclusion, I repeat the request from my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for Ministers to use the forthcoming comprehensive spending review to make strong representations to the Chancellor and the Treasury. At the general election, much heat was created in constituencies such as Hendon in relation to education funding. I hope that we can address this concern before it becomes untenable to teach children in our schools.

3.18 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Our schools are under pressure, the like of which has not been seen for decades. In Oldham, we have taken more than our fair share of cuts. I want to use this opportunity to place on record my own thanks to teachers and support staff for the hard work and dedication they show every day in very difficult circumstances. But the cracks are clear, and many teachers, parents and children just cannot take any more.

We have an important opportunity to invest in young people, so they can progress and achieve their full potential, so they can be treated as individuals, and for

teaching and learning to be formed around their needs to set them on the path to a positive and productive life with an open outlook, confident in their place in the world, and with a determination to change it for the better. These are high stakes.

For too many, that is not the experience of pupils and parents in Oldham West and Royton. Since 2015, our town has seen cuts in excess of £32 million, with an average loss per pupil of £320. That money is impacting directly on teaching and learning, and on the special educational needs and disability and specialist support provision our students desperately need. The results of the cuts are clear to see. Oldham now has fewer teachers. According to the Government's own school workforce data, we have lost 100 teachers, while the number of pupils has increased by a third—more than 8,700—since 2010. The numbers simply do not add up. It is not difficult to see why students are struggling, parents are frustrated, and many teachers are leaving the profession because they cannot take the strain. The present situation is not fair on anyone involved in the system.

Our schools have not received the golden gift that the Government would have us believe they are offering. To add insult to injury, Oldham is meant to be one of the opportunity areas that they say need additional resources and additional focus. So much so, in fact, that the Minister for School Standards—who is in the Chamber—decided to return to the scene of the crime, and, a short while ago, visited Yew Tree Primary School in Chadderton. I should be embarrassed if I were in the Minister's position. Yew Tree primary has suffered a cut of £659 per pupil, but he thought it fitting to go there and talk about what a wonderful job the Government are doing to support schools. The brass neck on that Minister! However, Yew Tree primary is not the only school in such circumstances. Oldham Academy North has seen a cut of £672 per pupil, and at Holy Family in Limeside and Stanley Road primary there have been cuts of £517 and £439 per pupil respectively.

While there are many good examples of good teaching and learning, the fact is that there are secondary schools which are failing to provide a basic standard of education. I entirely support the staff and the work that they are doing, but it is also right for me to give parents a voice when they do not feel that they have access to a good or outstanding school for their children. More than 75% of secondary school students in the Hollinwood ward do not have access to a good or outstanding school; in Royton South the figure is 30%, and in Medlock Vale it is 25%.

We have fewer teachers and more pupils, experienced staff are leaving the profession, and the school system has been fragmented by academisation, free schools, university technical colleges, and all the other pet projects. We are told that there is no money, but there was money enough for £14 million to be found for a failed UTC and £4 million for the failed Collective Spirit free school. Both those schools, incidentally, have got away without a single examination of what really went on with their finances. There is money for pet projects, but there is no money for the basic provision of education in our schools.

Enough is enough. We have heard, across parties, about the frustration that is being felt. There is unity throughout the Chamber: everyone thinks that our young people deserve better and our teachers deserve better.

Now is the time to provide the money that will deliver decent education. It does not have to be this way. At the end of January there was a tax surplus of some £14 billion, £5.8 billion higher than last year's. The money is in the coffers, and there has been a deliberate choice not to use it. That is a scandal.

3.23 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): In the limited time that I have, I shall focus on the issue of high-needs funding. The high-needs pot funds children with special educational needs and disabilities in both mainstream and special schools. While it is true that funding has increased, the high-needs landscape in our schools has fundamentally changed. Demand has gone up, and there has been an explosion in pupil complexity. Teachers nowadays are dealing with a landscape that is wholly different from the one that existed even as recently as 10 years ago.

When I visit schools in Cheltenham—whether they are mainstream schools like Balcarras or special schools like Belmont, Bettridge, The Ridge Academy and Battledown Centre—the same message is received time and time again. The present cohort of pupils, through no fault of their own, are far more complex and have a far greater variety of needs than ever before. Indeed, that was the message that came from Peter Hales when he met the Minister, to whom I am extremely grateful for listening so attentively and with such evident concern at the meeting earlier this week.

It is fascinating to speak to teachers who have been in post for 20 years. They say that 20 years ago in a school like—for instance—The Ridge Academy, which deals with children with behavioural or emotional problems, it might have been possible for one teacher to teach a class of 15 pupils because that would have been sufficient to deal with the level of complexity, but nowadays it would be completely inadequate.

I will give one small example. The headteacher told me that increasingly he is seeing children in his classroom exhibit symptoms of what can only be described as an acute mental health crisis, which was hitherto unknown. What are teachers supposed to do in that situation? Do they take the child to A&E, which might not be the right place for them, and takes resources out of the school? Do they try to deal with the situation themselves, although often they feel that they do not have the necessary skillset for that?

The reasons for that increasing complexity are not necessarily clear. Some people cite the fact that, mercifully, there are children surviving childbirth who might not have done so 10 years ago—thank goodness for the marvels of modern medicine. Others point to issues of social breakdown. Others even point to social media. In the fullness of time we will need to have an inquiry into why we are seeing these greater levels of complexity. Regardless of the causes, however, the symptoms are crystal clear, and the fact is that our schools are struggling to deal with them. I pay tribute to the teachers in my schools, who are doing a genuinely heroic job trying to deal with some of these issues.

What are the solutions? I think that funding will need to be part of it. The high-needs block is of the order of £6 billion, and one of the reasons why people like me are so keen to see the Brexit issue resolved is that we know the Government are holding back money, quite

properly, to deal with contingencies that might arise from a disorderly Brexit. Some people say that figure is in the region of £15 billion to £20 billion, so releasing just a proportion of it could have a dramatic impact on a £6 billion budget.

The second proposal, which I commend to the Minister, is to give these schools a facility that would allow them, when a pupil is having an acute mental health crisis, to pick up the phone and be assured that someone will come to assist. Even if that resource was just one or two people who were shared across the whole town, between Belmont School, Bettridge School and The Ridge Academy, perhaps funded by the clinical commissioning group, it would be enormously helpful. It would allow the schools to deal with problems in a way that is proportionate, effective for the individual and would not have knock-on implications at A&E. Yes, it would have a cost, but it would not be fanciful or unrealistic.

My final point is that if we are to ease the pressure on special schools, it is critical that mainstream schools are encouraged to do what they can to deal with children with SEN statements. That complexity is increasingly exhibited in mainstream schools, and they need to be incentivised to look after those children as much as possible. One of the perverse incentives is that they must pay the first £6,000 themselves, so I invite the Government to look at that again. I hope that more funding will be made available in the spending review in due course, because it is urgently required in Cheltenham.

3.28 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Government keep telling us that more money than ever before is going to schools, but they ignore the reality on the ground. Today I want to unpick one number that they have used to justify their position, because it simply does not stand up to scrutiny. Shortly after the 2017 general election the Government announced an extra £1.3 billion. According to Survation, a full three quarters of a million people changed the party they voted for in 2017 because of the school funding emergency. The Government had to respond, but they misheard us—we said “More money,” not “Move money.”

That £1.3 billion was not new money. Some £315 million was taken out of a fund for new PE facilities, and the Government passed the bill for 30 new schools on to cash-strapped local authorities. The Government raided the new money from the capital budget while the National Audit Office estimates that it will cost £6.7 billion just to return all school buildings to a satisfactory condition. Newbridge Primary School in Bath has fallen foul of that raid. Children are being taught in buildings with leaky roofs, and they play on playing fields surrounded by crumbling walls. At a meeting I secured with a Minister, the school was told to look for a cheaper ground maintenance contractor.

Meanwhile, the so-called new money did nothing to reverse the real-terms cuts to per-pupil funding between 2015 and 2017. Today, 91% of schools have less money per pupil in real terms than they did in 2015. In my constituency, schools have seen their per-pupil funding cut by £213 in real terms since 2015.

The reason this angers me so much is that our schools funding emergency is a political choice. The latest estimate from the National Education Union is that it would cost about £2.2 billion to bring the main three blocks of the national funding formula back up to 2015 levels.

[Wera Hobhouse]

Instead, the Government have spent more than half that money on increasing the higher rate threshold for income tax, so that people like us here in Parliament get a tax cut of more than £500 per year, even though we Lib Dems voted against the tax cuts for ourselves. This just goes to show the very wrong choices that this Government are making. The Liberal Democrats committed to reversing school cuts at the last general election and we will do so again at the next one, but the longer the Government wait, the more teachers and parents will vote with their feet and they will probably do so in the local elections on 2 May.

I want to make one special plea today, and it is one that has been echoed across the Chamber. The Government must provide an immediate funding boost for pupils with special educational needs. They are on the front-line of our schools funding emergency. The high-needs budget is not keeping up with the rise in SEND pupil numbers. In Bath and North East Somerset, the high-needs budget is worth about £21,000 for each child with an education, health and care plan, but that is £1,600 less in real terms than in 2015. We are more than £1.8 million short of what we need just to tread water, and this is for children with the most complex special needs. Support for those who do not meet the threshold for an EHCP must be paid out of the squeezed local authority schools budget.

The Minister must consider providing additional money in the national funding formula to cover some of the costs that schools are currently paying—usually £6,000—as their contribution towards an education, health and care plan. That way, we could free up schools' budgets to provide in-school support for children with additional needs who do not usually qualify for an EHCP, such as pupils with dyslexia or high-functioning autism. I urge the Government to end this funding emergency, so that schools and colleges, and particularly pupils with SEND, can have the money that they so desperately need and deserve.

3.32 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): I should like to start by correcting a misunderstanding about my question to the Prime Minister during PMQs on 13 March. After letters and meetings with local headteachers, I asked why the Secretary of State had failed to meet a group of Kent headteachers about school cuts. They wrote to me as part of the Coastal Alliance Co-operative Trust. However, following investigations by my office and the office of the Secretary of State, it appears that a different group, called the WorthLess? campaign, had requested those meetings, and it has now met officials from the Department. This wider campaigning body represents a much larger number of concerned school leaders nationally. So I apologise if my original form of words was inaccurate or misleading. This was most definitely not intended by myself, by the group of headteachers who originally wrote to me or by their pupils' parents. Moreover, I sincerely hope that this misunderstanding will not deter the Secretary of State from taking up my invitation to meet my hard-working headteachers to discuss school funding ahead of the comprehensive spending review. The invitation still very much stands, and he would be very welcome to visit those schools in my constituency.

I would like to talk about the very real struggle faced by those and other headteachers every single day as they are forced to make yet more cuts and to cut yet more staff and resources. Schools are having to provide services that were previously provided by other agencies, yet the flawed and widely criticised national funding formula does not make that possible. Huge differences in per-pupil funding remain in place across the country, and to date, no positive difference has been made to the majority of schools in my constituency. In fact, according to the Library, the total schools block allocation for Canterbury has fallen 6.4% in real terms over the past five years, compared with 4.8% for England nationally.

I hear time and again from local headteachers about how hard it is to plan ahead when their funding cycle remains wedded to processes at Her Majesty's Treasury. As we heard from the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), this Government have provided NHS managers with a long-term plan, so why can we not afford the same degree of mid-to-long-term policy stability for our headteachers, too?

A member of the Kent Association of Headteachers wrote to me a few days ago and said:

"Since 2010, schools with pupils aged 5-16 have received an 8% real-terms cut in funding. The figure is 20% post-16. Against this background, headteachers across Kent remain extremely concerned that the Secretary of State and Minister for Schools continue to underplay the devastating impact that the ongoing funding crisis is having upon our provision and capacity to meet the needs of children and families."

Others have also pointed out the considerable evidence to challenge the Minister's assertion that real-terms cuts have ended since the introduction of the national funding formula in April 2018. The independent Education Policy Institute has stated that over 50% of maintained schools and academies are now spending more than their annual revenue.

Over 1,000 councillors from across the country recently wrote to the Secretary of State demanding adequate funding for schools to support high-needs pupils and those requiring SEND provision. Every Member of this House will have parents, grandparents and carers crying in their weekly surgeries as they face a desperate battle to get proper provision for their children. Social care, emotional wellbeing, and speech and language services have all been cut. PE lessons, sports equipment, the teaching of arts and drama, and the chance to add fun to children's lives have all but disappeared.

I left the classroom in 2016. While my new job is incredibly stressful at times and has many pressures, the pressures faced by teachers, support staff and headteachers are becoming intolerable. The welfare of vulnerable children in a time of shocking child poverty is left to the heroes who work in our schools. They are overworked, underpaid and dipping into their own modest pay packets to look after, feed and help children, when that should be the duty of the state.

3.37 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Stephen Yaxley-Lennon or Tommy Robinson, as he is known, is currently holding an event in my constituency, and I want to make it clear—I am sure the whole House will agree—that this individual is not welcome to spread his xenophobic, Islamophobic, homophobic, racist vitriol in my community or any other. He seeks to divide rather than unite, but we do things differently in Manchester. We stand together against hate.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing this debate and the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for starting off with a powerful speech. She talked about billions being spent on Brexit rather than education and about a deep-rooted, systemic problem with funding in the system. The whole House has been united in discussing the problem of school funding. There is no party political divide anymore, because everyone on both sides is worried. Things must change.

After what we have heard today, we can be in no doubt about the impact on our schools of this Government's continued austerity. The situation is shocking. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Education Secretary have both stated in the House that every school in England would see a cash-terms increase in funding, yet that flies in the face of reality and what we have heard today. On top of the funding cuts that schools have experienced, which I will outline later, our schools are having to plug the gaps in local government, healthcare and many other services. SEND and mental health services have been shattered. Some teachers have had to take it upon themselves to take children to A&E, which is outrageous in this day and age.

Local authorities face an overall funding gap of over £3 billion next year, rising to £8 billion by 2025. By 2020, their core funding will have been cut by nearly £16 billion since 2010. Figures compiled by the Labour party show that, in 2017-18, local authorities spent more than £800 million over budget on children's services and social care due to growing demand and, as a result, were forced to make cuts elsewhere and to draw on reserves. This is having a dramatic impact on the level and type of services that councils across our great country can provide.

Many councils now spend less on early intervention, and youth services across the country have been devastated. On top of this, our schools are experiencing cuts across the board. Since 2015, the Government have cut £2.7 billion from school budgets in England. Despite the claim of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that no child will lose their free school meal eligibility, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that 160,000 children—one in eight on the legacy system—will not be eligible under universal credit.

The Government's own data shows that, as of January 2018, more than 4,000 children and young people with an education, health and care plan or statement were awaiting provision—in other words, they were waiting for a place in education.

Over half a million children are now in supersize classes. There is an unquestionable recruitment crisis in our schools, with the Government now having missed their own recruitment targets for five years in a row. For the second year running, there are now more teachers leaving the profession than joining it.

There is a crisis in our schools to which this Government are turning a blind eye. In fact, there has been a concerted effort by the Government to fudge the figures and deflect attention away from the cuts to school funding over which they have presided. According to data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the reality is that school budgets are lower in real terms than they were five years ago.

To add insult to injury, we have had the Chancellor's £400 million for "little extras," which is an insult to teachers, schools and children who have faced year after

year of austerity. The fact is that, across the country, schools are having to write home to parents to ask for money to buy basic resources. They do not need money for little extras; they need it for the essentials.

If funding per pupil had been maintained in value since 2015, school funding overall would be £5.1 billion higher than it is today, and 91% of schools are still facing real-terms budget cuts, despite any reallocation of the funding formula. Members present already know all too well the impact on the ground, and as has already been expressed in the debate, headteachers and parents are telling us about it almost daily.

The average shortfall is more than £67,000 in primary schools, and more than £273,000 in secondary schools. Our schools have 137,000 more pupils but 5,400 fewer teachers, 2,800 fewer teaching assistants, 1,400 fewer support staff and 1,200 fewer auxiliary staff. The Government need to stop their sticking-plaster approach to school finances and give schools the funding they really need.

Sadly, it is clear that austerity is not over for our schools. When will the Minister remove his head from the sand and truly begin to hear the voices of schools, teachers, parents and Members on both sides of the House? I have spent far too many hours on the Floor of the House, along with my colleagues on the shadow Front Bench and right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House, trying to get the Government to face the facts and act.

It beggars belief that the Government have ignored the School Teachers Review Body's recommendation of an across-the-board 3.5% increase to all pay and allowances and are now calling for it to be capped at 2%—the first time that has happened in the body's 28-year history. To make matters worse, the Government expect schools to meet the cost of the first percentage point of the pay award from existing budgets, which have already been cut to the bone.

With the economic uncertainty of Brexit and the challenges it will bring, to have a Government who are failing to invest in education and skills defies all logic. As a former primary school teacher, I know the difference a good teacher makes. With the right support and resources, they can raise a child's attainment and aspiration. We go into teaching because we believe in the value of education. We believe in its power to create social mobility, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) said. We believe in its ability to create ambition for all. This is about our children's future and the future of our country. Our schools need fair funding, and they need it now.

3.45 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Let me start by saying that I share the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) about Stephen Yaxley-Lennon's visit to his constituency today, and I am sure they are shared right across this House.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing and opening this important debate. The Government are determined to create a world-class education system that offers opportunity to every child, no matter their circumstances or where they live. I share the views of many in this debate that schools must have the resources they need to make that happen.

[Nick Gibb]

That is why we are investing in our schools, delivering on our promise to make funding fairer so that the investment is going to the right places, and helping schools to make the most out of every pound they receive.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Does the Minister agree with my analysis, based on one-to-one meetings with headteachers in Solihull, that much of the long-term financial challenge relates to teachers' pensions and that we must put those on a sustainable long-term footing, as well as dealing with the real challenges we face in the here and now?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the teachers' pension scheme. The employer contribution rate will increase from 16% to 23% in September 2019 but, as confirmed earlier in April, we will be providing funding for this increase in 2019-20 for all state-funded schools, further education and sixth-form colleges, and adult community learning providers. My hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Mrs Badenoch) asked about that funding in future years, and it will of course be a matter for the spending review.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) asked whether I could meet his local headteachers to discuss funding, and I would be delighted to do so. The Secretary of State and I meet headteachers regularly, almost on a weekly basis, to discuss not only school funding, but other issues such as standards in our schools, and we would be happy to do that with the hon. Gentleman's local headteachers as well.

Standards are rising in our schools. Thanks in part to our reforms, the proportion of pupils in good or outstanding schools has increased from 66% in 2010 to 85%. I listened carefully to the excellent opening speech by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans, who has raised the issue of school funding, both for her constituency's schools and nationally, on many occasions, including in Westminster Hall debates recently and again today. I am sure that the Treasury will also have heard what she had to say today. I can give her the assurances she seeks that the Secretary of State and I are both working hard to prepare our spending review bid for when that process starts later in the year to ensure that we have the best bid possible for schools, high-needs and post-16 funding.

As I was saying, standards are rising in our schools. In primary schools, our more rigorous curriculum is on a par with the highest-performing in the world and it has been taught since September 2014. Since it was first tested in 2016, we have seen the proportion of primary school pupils reaching the expected standard in the maths test rise from 70% to 76% in 2018, and in the reading test the figure has risen from 66% to 75%. Of course we would not know that if we adopted the Labour party's policy of scrapping SATs, which of course we will not do.

Mike Kane: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not give way.

Since the introduction of the phonics check in 2012, the proportion of six-year-olds reaching the expected standards in the phonics decoding check has risen from

58% in 2012 to 82% last year. We have risen from joint 10th to joint eighth in the PIRLS—the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study—of the reading ability of nine-year-olds, achieving our highest ever score in that survey. In secondary schools, our more rigorous academic curriculum and qualifications support social mobility by giving disadvantaged children the knowledge they need to have the same career and life opportunities as their peers. The attainment gap between the most disadvantaged pupils and their peers, measured by the disadvantage gap index, has narrowed by nearly 10% since 2011.

To support these improvements, the Government have prioritised school spending, while having to take difficult decisions in other areas of public spending. We have been able to do that because of our balanced approach to the public finances and to our stewardship of the economy, reducing the annual deficit from an unsustainable 10% of GDP in 2010—some £150 billion a year—to 2% in 2018. The economic stability that that provided has resulted in employment rising to record levels and unemployment being at its lowest level since the 1970s, giving young people leaving school more opportunities to have jobs and start their careers. Youth unemployment is at half the rate it was when we came into office in 2010, taking over from Labour.

It is our balanced approach that allows us to invest in public services. Core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. That includes the extra £1.3 billion for schools and high needs that was announced in 2017 and that we have invested across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above the plans set out in the spending review.

Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that in 2020 real-terms per pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in schools will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000. We do recognise, though, the budgeting challenges that schools face as we ask them to achieve more for children. One element of it is about making sure that money is directed to where it is needed most. Since April last year, we have started to distribute funding through the new national funding formula, with each area's allocation taking into account the individual needs and characteristics of its pupils and schools. Schools are already benefiting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula.

Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that the previous system had left most underfunded. By 2019-20, all schools will attract an increase of at least 1% per pupil compared with 2017-18 baselines, and the most underfunded schools will attract up to 6% more per pupil by 2019-20, compared with 2017-18.

Robert Halfon: I welcome what my right hon. Friend said about phonics and SATs, which it is important we keep, but does he agree that if the national health service can have a 10-year plan and a five-year funding settlement, education should have a 10-year plan and a minimum of a five-year funding settlement?

Nick Gibb: As I have said to the Education Committee, which my right hon. Friend chairs, I do not disagree with that view. We will say more about our approach to the spending review in due course.

In Hertfordshire, where the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans is located, funding for schools has increased this year under the national funding formula by 2.4% per pupil compared with 2017. That is equivalent to an extra £32.1 million in total, when rising pupil numbers are taken into account.

My hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden made a measured and therefore persuasive speech about the funding of schools in her constituency. As a consequence, her words will undoubtedly carry weight with the Treasury. She made the important point that 90% of pupils in her constituency now attend good or outstanding schools, compared with just 67% in 2010.

I listened carefully to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton); as a neighbouring MP, I find I always do. He will be aware that funding in his constituency has risen by 5.5% per pupil compared with 2017. That is one of the highest increases and reflects the historical underfunding of West Sussex schools—something the national funding formula was introduced to address. He referred to teachers' pay, which is due to rise by 3.5% for teachers on the main pay scale and by 2% for those on the upper pay scale.¹ We are funding both those pay rises, except for the first 1%, which schools will have budgeted for already.

I also listened carefully to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I congratulate him on the fact that 96% of pupils in schools in his constituency are attending good or outstanding schools. He will be aware that under the national funding formula per pupil funding in his constituency is rising by 4.5% compared with 2017-18.

I welcome the contribution to the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and his acknowledgement that, as a result of the fairer national funding formula, schools in his constituency will attract a 5.9% per pupil increase. In a compelling speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) raised the issue of special needs funding. Our commitment to helping every child to reach their full potential applies just as strongly to children with special educational needs and disabilities as it does to any other child, and we know that schools share that commitment. We recognise the concerns that have been raised about the costs of making provision for children and young people with complex special educational needs. We have increased overall funding allocations to local authorities for high needs year on year, and we announced in December that we will provide an additional £250 million over these last two financial years.

Jim McMahon: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not, because I am running out of time; I do apologise to the hon. Gentleman.

In Hertfordshire, for example, that means that the authority will receive an additional £5.7 million between these two financial years, taking its high-needs funding to £114.7 million. High-needs funding nationally is now over £6 billion, having risen by £1 billion since 2013. We will ensure in the coming spending review that we keep a firm focus on identifying the resources required to ensure that the most vulnerable children are receiving the support they need. Of course, the response to pressures

on high-needs budgets cannot be about just funding. It must also be about ensuring that we are spending the money effectively.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans also raised the issue of post-16 funding. We recognise the pressures that post-16 funding has been under—my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is also listening to this debate. We have protected the base rate of funding for all 16 to 19-year-old students until 2020, and our commitment to the 16-to-19 sector has contributed to what is the highest proportion of 16 to 17-year-olds participating in education or apprenticeships since records began. We are also providing additional funding to support colleges and schools to grow participation in level 3 maths. Institutions will receive an extra £600 for every additional student for the next academic year, 2019-20.

I have listened carefully to hon. and right hon. Members' speeches today. The Government recognise the pressure on schools as we seek to balance the public finances. While bringing down the budget deficit, we have protected funding for the NHS, international development and schools for five to 16-year-olds. We are now preparing the best spending review bid that we can for schools, for high needs and for post-16 funding, and today's debate will undoubtedly have an influence on the Treasury. Standards are rising in our schools. The attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds has closed by 13.5% since 2011 for primary schools and 9.5% for secondary schools. Reading standards are rising, maths standards are rising and the proportion of pupils being taught in good or outstanding schools has risen significantly. I am grateful to all Members who have contributed to today's debate and I know that they will have been heard in all the right places.

3.57 pm

Mrs Main: I thank the Minister for his response; I have to say, I think he was a little more mindful of the comments made in the Chamber today than he might have appeared to be in Westminster Hall.

It might have sounded as though Members across the House had met in a pub beforehand and conspired to sing the same song from the same hymn sheet but it is indeed the same song. We have all expressed views that reflect the constituencies that we serve. Unless these issues are addressed, whoever is sitting in the Minister's place in 10 years' time will hear the same song, and it is not just about educational outcomes. I was a teacher a long time ago, and it is about the child's experience—the experiences that we all carry through life.

We are passionate about this issue in this House, because we all know the impact of not getting education right and we all know that we are sowing the future of our nation with what we are asking today. If the Chancellor is listening, will he double whatever figure he might come up with? Or maybe even treble it; I do not mind. But whatever figure it is, it will never be enough, because excellence always cost money, effort and time, and we cannot get those on the cheap. So whatever is coming up, please listen to debates such as these, because we are not going away. Somebody else will put in for another debate, I will be there alongside them and we will come back and say, "What more can we do?", so hopefully we can get this solved.

1.[Official Report, 1 May 2019, Vol. 659, c. 3MC.]

[Mrs Main]

Resolved,

That this House notes with concern the increasing financial pressures faced by schools; further notes that schools are having to provide more and more services, including those previously provided by other public agencies including health and local authorities; notes with concern funds for schools being spread more thinly and not being sufficient to cope with additional costs; and calls on the Government to increase funding provided to schools to cover the additional services schools now perform for pupils.

Children and Young People: Restrictive Intervention

3.59 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Department for Education to urgently issue guidance on reducing the use of restrictive intervention of children and young people; and further calls on Ofsted to change its guidance to inspectors to recognise the importance of seeking to avoid the use of those interventions with children and young people.

I will start by thanking the hon. Members for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) for joining me in applying for this debate. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for taking through the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act 2018 to significant advance. He deserves enormous credit. I also pay tribute to Olaseni Lewis, who tragically lost his life through the use of restraint, and to his parents, who fought so hard for justice. Finally, let me pay tribute to the brilliant Challenging Behaviour Foundation and Viv Cooper, who runs it, and to Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland and its founder Beth Morrison for the brilliant work of that organisation.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Would the right hon. Gentleman accept an intervention?

Norman Lamb: I am not going to take interventions, because I am under strict instructions to keep to time. I hope that Members will accept that, with my apologies.

This is a debate about the human rights of children. I am afraid to say that abuse of children is endemic throughout the system, and I am also afraid to say that the Government are complicit in the abuse of children for failing to get to grips with it and for not issuing guidance, which is now five years overdue. I will develop my points in due course. What are we talking about? Well, the restrictions imposed on children include: physical restraint such as prone restraint, whereby an individual—in this case, a child—is held to the floor with their face down to the floor; seclusion, whereby a child is locked in a room, and these are often children with acute and complex autism, who will be in a state of acute anxiety; mechanical restraint, whereby a child might be tied to a chair or a bed, for example; blanket restrictions, which might involve preventing children from going outside; and chemical restraint. The settings that we are talking about include residential schools, special schools and, incidentally, mainstream schools, as well as children's homes, assessment and treatment centres, and hospitals within the NHS.

By way of example, when I was Minister I visited a girl called Fauzia, who was admitted to St Andrew's Hospital in Northampton at the age of 15 and was there for nearly two years. When I visited her, her family told me that she had been subjected to the constant use of restraint, was prevented from going outside most of the time and was often secluded in a room that was, frankly, like a prison cell. I visited her two years after we had got her out of that institution, when she was being cared for by an organisation which understood that staff have to be trained in how autism affects an individual. In the period from the day that she was discharged from St Andrew's to the day that I visited

her two years later, she had not been restrained on a single occasion; we have to read something quite profound into that.

I also met Leo, the mother of Stephen, who has autism and a learning disability. Leo told me the harrowing story of a child subject to prone restraint in a special school. Stephen was referred to a residential school in Norfolk, but prone restraint was again used. Serious medical conditions were ignored and not properly addressed, which ended up with Stephen being rushed to hospital because a bump on his head actually turned out to be a brain haemorrhage that had been ignored for several weeks.

I have also been contacted by Deidre Shakespeare, whose son Harry has been subject to mechanical restraint—being tied to a chair, with his legs also tied to the chair. Deidre and her son live in Tyrone in Northern Ireland, and her concern is that, given the collapse of power sharing, there is simply no authority in Northern Ireland to address these very serious concerns, which in my view amount to human rights abuses.

On the scale of the problem, as I said at the start, it is endemic in the system. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation carried out a survey with 204 respondents: 88% of families said their disabled child had experienced physical restraint; 35% reported it happening regularly; 71% said their child had experienced seclusion; in over half the cases of physical intervention or seclusion reported, the child was between the age of five and 10—these are small children being treated in an entirely inappropriate way; 58% said their child had experienced restraint that had led to an injury; and 91% reported an emotional impact on their child. Radio 5 Live, which I applaud for featuring this issue, made a freedom of information request in 2017—only a fifth of authorities responded—and identified 13,000 physical restraints in the previous three years and 731 injuries. We are talking about children placed in these organisations by the state. It is shocking and scandalous.

Here's the thing: it does not need to happen in most cases. In most cases, it is avoidable with the proper culture and training of staff. In a report commissioned by the Government, Dame Christine Lenehan, a leading expert in this field, quotes a local authority officer who said:

"There can be a vicious circle occurring within the ASD cohort"—

people with autism. It continues:

"A poor provider triggers challenging behaviour or physical meltdowns (or fails to prevent such events), often exacerbating this with their reactions e.g. restraint, punishment or confinement. Good providers in whose care this behaviour may not have occurred will now not accept the child due to their history and pattern of risk. Therefore, the child is placed in a more restrictive or secure setting which can result in a worsening situation. Eventually, the child reaches a secure NHS setting which often is wholly inappropriate for their ASD needs. In different circumstances, a good specialist day placement could have worked for this child." That is really shocking, because so often children who end up in a secure setting never escape from it again and spend their lives in an institution. This is happening within our society behind locked doors, and it is wholly unacceptable.

Dame Christine Lenehan in her report says:

"Strategies such as positive behaviour support (PBS) can also be effective for managing challenging behaviour. PBS assesses the relationship between environmental events and behaviour, identifies what can cause the behaviour and uses proactive strategies to

prevent it. One respondent to our call for evidence noted that using a PBS-informed strategy had coincided with an almost 90% reduction in the use of physical restraints."

If it is possible to avoid it, to use it is an abuse of that child's human rights—full stop. There can be no compromise on this. We have to end it, and that is why it is so important that the Department for Education takes notice.

I want to contrast the approach between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education. As a Minister in the Department of Health, I issued guidance in 2014 for adults designed to radically reduce the use of restraint and to end the use of prone restraint. Now we have a provision, which will be introduced into the formal NHS contract, requiring that certified providers of training meet a standard of training that avoids the use of restraint in the first place, rather than training staff how to use restraint. That is the key difference. It will be embedded in how the NHS works and will be part of the Care Quality Commission framework.

By comparison, the Department for Education seems like a wholly different culture. The child is seen as the problem, interfering with education and therefore disciplined, with no attempt to understand their needs. We have a responsibility to understand what causes the behaviour in the first place, but there is no promotion of positive behaviour support or any other preventive approach. What a bizarre situation we have, when children are less well protected from abuse than adults. That is surely unacceptable.

There is no obligation to collect and report data on the use of restraint or seclusion, and parents do not even have to be told when their child has force used against them. The guidance offered by Ofsted is weak and needs to be reformed and reinforced. There is now a plan for legal action by 600 parents whose children have suffered physically or psychologically, with crowd-funding under way. The claim will be based on age and disability discrimination, and the Human Rights Act.

I have the following questions for the Minister. When will the guidance be published? We have been waiting for five years for it. How many children have suffered abuse in the meantime? Will it take a human rights-based approach? Will it include training at a certified standard as a requirement? Will the training be funded by the Government to ensure that it happens across the country? Will the same approach apply whatever setting the child is in?

Staff need support, training and guidance, but the bottom line is that the abuse of children must stop and the Government must act. We, and especially children, have waited far too long.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that we have very little time left. I hope that we can manage without a formal time limit, if everyone speaks for approximately five minutes.

4.11 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and to work with him to try to resolve this problem—a problem that need not exist at all.

[Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

We hear the phrase “safeguarding children” all the time, but words mean nothing if they are not matched by commensurate actions. We all know that looking after our children well, getting to know them as they grow and finding ways to make their lives safe, happy and fulfilled, are what every parent aspires to—and, indeed, I hope, every teacher when they embark on their careers. It is not always easy: children can be stubborn, petulant and anxious, much like their parents, probably.

Children have a natural curiosity to discover, to learn, to play, and every good parent or teacher enjoys nothing more than fuelling those interests and having the wonderful satisfaction of watching the child blossom, discover new things, learn about their unique character and gifts, and start their life’s journey with pleasure and excitement. Sadly, for vulnerable children, those with physical, neurological or emotional higher needs than most, that vision of a healthy and nurturing childhood can only be a dream. The reality is that many of those most in need of nurture and care find that they get none of that. By their particular difference, they struggle with the “normal” learning environment, and as those around them fail to realise that their charges are in distress, the children use the only tools they have to demonstrate their anxieties, fears, or even terrors, and display what we call “challenging behaviour”.

I am not a fan of politically correct language, but what does “challenging behaviour” mean? It means lashing out or perhaps hiding away: it means a child has been put under too much stress and so the most basic survival instincts kicked in. The child, fearful of whatever it is that is going on around them or happening to them, tries to protect themselves with the limited tools available to them. As the mother of a now nearly 20-year-old university student, whose Asperger’s was undiagnosed until he was nearly nine years old, learning to provide a world around him so that he could thrive, rather than struggle and suffer from profound anxiety attacks because of the normal environment around him, was a learning curve. But once we found an intervention that worked, having identified the source of the distress, his anxiety and “challenging behaviour”, as it is now called, simply fell away. A bright boy, a happy child, reading for hours at a time; other children near him—not so good. People touching his food—profoundly upsetting; bright lights or unexpected loud noises—meltdown guaranteed.

My son was lucky beyond words. We had teachers who were always willing to learn how to support him, so that he could enjoy school. A beanbag hidden behind a teacher’s desk, to escape to if a lesson was too noisy. An agreement that he only ate certain foods, and an explanation to the other children as to why. Extraordinary staff who learned, with us and with him, how to provide a positive environment. In so doing, they allowed my son to thrive and succeed within mainstream school. Not every child with special needs is so lucky.

I first met the wonderful Ella, one of my younger constituents, when her mother, Elly, contacted me shortly after I was first elected, in a state of profound distress and anger at the long-term physical damage caused to her daughter by the use of physical restraint, leading to violent reactive behaviour which left her with permanent physical damage. There seemed to be no way to empower Ella’s parents to challenge the school, nor to ask for justification for the use of restraint. That family are

extraordinary. Nothing—although so many brick walls have been put in their way—has stopped them battling to drive change for their daughter and other vulnerable children.

The school did not help. The council did not really get as stuck in as it should have done to meet its duty of care to this bright young girl. Only Ella’s parents and friends really fought to effect change for their girl, and for others they know need better support and the enactment of what having a duty of care actually means.

We need the Government to help us change the existing—inadequate at best—systems, from basic national guidance for teachers and support staff to evidence-based early intervention support for families. Learning what works for your child’s health and wellbeing is not easy, and every parent is always a novice, so let us share the evidence and best practice, to help each other most effectively. In doing so, positive behaviour support training in schools will quickly change the challenges into good environments for these children, and the adults in loco parentis for them while in their care, from whence reductions in cost to the state and, most important, the reduction of—and hopefully an end to—the unnecessary, unacceptable, irreparable damage to these young people. Be it physical or emotional damage, so much can be avoided with intelligent and supportive environments.

All children are born with great potential, and I always say it is the adults around them who either help them to thrive or allow them to fail. We can do so much better to get this right early on—support parents and thereby help each child to reach their potential. To ensure that we get this right, we need a safeguarding system that is fit for purpose. Ofsted needs to be inspecting specifically for safeguarding outcomes for disabled and special needs children, and for that all schools must have a robust, mandatory recording system of all interventions with their pupils, so that parents, councils and Ofsted can see what is actually going on and hold them to account.

In my work on children’s services on the Public Accounts Committee, I continue to be dismayed that Ofsted seems to have little guidance to inspect the outcomes for our most vulnerable children. In this area of restraint usage and oversight of special needs management, through to foster and kinship care, we need to see clearer inspection rules and a much stronger accountability system, which includes the recording and reporting of restrictive interventions and actions, so that harm to our most precious children can be held to account.

4.18 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this important debate, and on the powerful case that he made. I am sure the whole House would pay tribute to him for the progress that he has led in improving conditions for people with mental ill health over many years. Personally, I thank him for the support and advice that he so generously gave me during the passage of Seni’s law last year.

The use of restraint and excessive force is one of the most pressing issues for children who have experience of secure mental health units. Restraint is humiliating and degrading for children, as it is for adults. It can undermine their recovery and can make the child’s mental health condition worse.

There have been too many tragic incidents where children and young people have been seriously injured—even killed—because of excessive restraint. Seni's law came about in response to the horrific death of my constituent, Seni Lewis. Seni, who was just 21 years old, died following severe and prolonged face-down restraint in a seclusion unit in a mental health hospital, when up to 11 police officers took it in turns to pin him face-down on the ground with his hands cuffed behind his head and his legs in shackles. That triggered a heart attack, which put him into a coma, and he was left to die all alone in a room, tied up face-down on the floor. Seni's tragic story is just one of too many deaths and scandals, including Winterbourne View, Southern Health, St Andrews and many others that Members will be familiar with.

It is shocking that children are more likely to be restrained than adults. According to the leading mental health charity Young Minds, children under the age of 20 are four times more likely than adults to be restrained face-down, three times more likely to be tranquilised and twice as likely to be put in handcuffs or leg braces. Although children are less likely than adults to be secluded, it is surely unacceptable that any child with mental ill health is ever locked up all alone in a seclusion room.

I was grateful for the huge support from across the House for Seni's law, which became an Act of Parliament last year. It introduced some important principles into law that now need to be extended to protect all people with mental ill health, including children, in every setting, not just mental health units, to which that piece of legislation applied. Those principles are intended to reduce the use of restraint, so that it is only ever used as a very last resort and face-down restraint is never used at all.

The mental health system needs to be fully transparent. There is wide regional variation in the use of restraint against children, but we do not know why, and data is not available for us to interrogate. The campaigning charity Agenda reports that in some mental health trusts, three quarters of children are restrained, while in others it is none at all. If some trusts can completely avoid the use of restraint against children, why can every trust not do so? We need a standardised national system for recording the use of restraint, so that we can compare like with like, identify best practice and ensure that it is shared, and allow us and other observers to fully interrogate and scrutinise the system to ensure that it is supporting and not harming some of the most vulnerable children in our society.

Half of all girls with mental ill health have experienced some form of abuse, either physical or sexual, that affected their mental health. The use of restraint against them—especially being pinned face down on the floor by men—reawakens the horrific abuse that made them ill in the first place, which can mean that they leave care with worse mental ill health than they arrived with. That surely cannot be acceptable.

The second important principle is accountability. All mental health settings need a policy in place for restraint reduction, with appropriate training to ensure that restraint is avoided whenever possible. They need a named senior person who is publicly accountable for how restraint is used, so that there is clarity about who is ultimately responsible for what happens in that setting.

Despite Government attempts to discourage it, the most dangerous form of restraint—face down on the floor—was used against children more than 2,500 times

in the most recent year for which data is available, yet that form of restraint is not supposed to happen at all. The current system clearly is not working. The deaths, injuries and psychological damage that excessive restraint causes to children must stop. I hope the Government will ensure that the important principles enshrined in Seni's law and the important work undertaken by Sir Simon Wessely's mental health review are used to protect every child who experiences mental ill health.

4.23 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): First, I pay tribute to the work of Inquest and Deborah Coles, who has worked in this field for many years and has a great deal of expertise. She continues to support families through very difficult processes, including inquests, which we know, as constituency MPs, can be extremely testing times for families. I also want to thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for securing the debate and for his expertise in this matter.

It is 15 years since Gareth Myatt died in a child prison. That is a terrible anniversary, when we think of how little has changed in the human rights picture. Adam Rickwood sadly hanged himself following restraint, also by people much bigger and older than he was, yet we still hear the sorts of figures mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed).

I want very briefly to put on record my thanks for what I learned as a Member of Parliament from listening to the passage of the Bill and from Seni's family. They were suffering, but how generous they were to allow their own family experience to teach us, as Members of Parliament, the meaning of what we do and how we can press the human rights of all those young people—not just those under 18, but those in their early 20s—who end up in these terrible situations.

It is clear from the Joint Committee on Human Rights report that there is insufficient oversight and accountability in many of our settings—mental health settings, child prison settings or child training centre settings. For example, there is the tragic case of Amy El-Keria, who died at the Priory some time ago. We know that much of what happened to her before she tragically died involved inadequate staffing levels, failures to share key risk and care information with staff and inadequate systems for identifying and managing ligature risk, such as placing Amy in an unsuitable room containing high-risk ligature points and missed opportunities to remove a scarf in Amy's possession. There were failures adequately to address the bullying of Amy by her peers or to follow the Priory's anti-bullying procedures, and failures to pass on key information about Amy's increased suicide risk on the day of her death. Finally, there was the delay in undertaking the final observation during which Amy was found hanging. To add to that, as I know from reading the paperwork that came out at the inquest, not one member of staff accompanied her to the hospital when, tragically, she was pronounced dead.

We must all remember these terrible incidents. Small numbers of people are in care in some form, but these individual stories do tell a tragic truth. In these individual cases of when things going wrong, there must be much quicker action by those working in child and adolescent mental health services and various other mental health systems. I would also like to see much more supervision of staff, particularly agency staff and new staff coming in on overnight shifts, when so much of this tends to happen.

[Catherine West]

In summing up, I merely want to put on record two key points. First, the Government must comply with international law and end the restraint techniques that we know, both from the passage of Seni's law and from the work that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk has emphasised today, are unlawful and contrary to the human rights of children. Secondly, the solitary confinement of children in detention should be completed phased out as a practice.

I will reiterate the very useful points that the right hon. Gentleman made in his opening speech. When will the Government publish guidance on this important area? When will the training requirements be clarified for providers who are paid by the public purse to look after children with severe mental health problems, developmental problems and other sorts of difficulties? Will the funding be adequate for those training requirements and for the providers, and will these apply to all settings in which children, sadly, are virtually imprisoned, including both children's social care and mental health settings?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We must now have a four-minute limit.

4.28 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). I was very glad to support the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) in securing this debate, and I pay tribute to him for his commitment to safeguarding the human rights of people with learning disability, autism or both.

It is important that we debate this matter in this place because it affects the most vulnerable people in our society—children and young people, and most especially children and young people who have learning disability, autism or both, and who are often less able to communicate their thoughts and feelings, or to describe and bear witness to what has happened to them. As a consequence, there is an enormous imbalance of power between children and young people, who often cannot speak for themselves, and the adults into whose care they are placed, whether in a school, healthcare or residential setting. That imbalance of power confers a clear and important responsibility on the staff who work with those young people, but also on the Government to ensure a system that is transparent, accountable and properly resourced and equipped to provide the best possible care, education and support.

We are debating serious concerns about the use of restraint and seclusion, and there are gaps in the regulatory and training framework in some settings, particularly education. Before I set those out, I wish to pay tribute to the many dedicated, highly skilled and tireless staff who work in schools, healthcare and residential settings with children and young people who have learning disabilities, autism or both. I pay particular tribute to the fantastic Turney School in my constituency, and to Marilyn Ross and her exceptional team at the Michael Tippett School. Her visionary work in establishing the Michael Tippett College has enabled 19 to 25-year-old students with learning disabilities, autism or both to remain in education.

Recent research by the Challenging Behaviour Foundation and Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland found that nearly 90% of parents of children with SEN or behavioural needs, including autism, reported that their child had been physically restrained. Some 35% said that that happened regularly, and more than half those cases involved children aged between five and 10. Only one in eight parents said that restraint was discussed with families in advance, and just 17% said there were discussions after the event to help prevent it from happening again. Some 50% of parents reported the use of medication to manage challenging behaviour; 58% of children or young people were injured; and 91% reported emotional impacts, including PTSD, heightened anxiety and insomnia.

We know that such restraint is not necessary, and with a little education and training in those settings, proven alternative forms of behaviour management can almost eliminate the need for restraint. Guidance and regulation on the use of restraint in healthcare settings is much more stringent than it is for education settings. Ofsted makes clear that it is good practice to record incidents of restraint and inform parents, but there is no requirement on schools to do so. That is problematic, because it is precisely those schools that already model good practice and have the best leadership and governance that will abide by that advice, while those schools with problems will be less likely to do so.

In 2014, the Government promised new guidance on reducing restrictive intervention in schools, but more than five years later that guidance is still to be introduced. That is not acceptable. No parent or carer should have to worry that their loved one will suffer violence, injury or psychological distress as a result of restraint in an education, health or care setting, yet that is the reality for too many families. The gaps in the current legislative and policy framework are glaring, but they are straightforward to fill, and the delay by the Government who promised new guidance in 2014 is simply inexcusable. New legislation and guidance must be supported by appropriate training and resources. I call on the Government to introduce that new guidance and regulation as soon as possible and to ensure that all staff working with the most vulnerable children in our society are properly equipped and resourced to implement it.

4.32 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this debate. We have heard some truly excellent speeches from right hon. and hon. Members.

Like other Members, since I was first elected, I have been inundated with schooling issues. Those include parents trying to secure special educational needs assessments, or those whose children have been diagnosed with special educational needs but are not getting the help they need. There are schools that cannot afford to provide the help that is needed, and teachers who struggle to cope with the number of children who need more from them. I must have dealt with thousands of such cases over the years. The reason why is that education for children matters. It matters that children get the support they need to achieve a rounded education and that schools receive the funding they need to provide it. It matters that parents know that their children will get the best chance at life in the future, and that is critical to this debate.

With that in mind, it is little wonder that there are times when restrictive intervention is needed—an overworked teacher might be attempting to deal with a child who is misunderstood, frustrated and unable to bond with the teacher or classroom assistant as there are too many in the class. That frustration turns to violence, and the child is in danger of hurting themselves or someone nearby. In such cases, action is needed. However, there are limits on restraint, which must always be the last available option and fully considered.

Everyone who has spoken so far has referred to the need for training and resources and to the capability of the schooling system to respond to this issue. Teachers must have the knowledge and training on how and when other methods can be employed and, if there is no option, how to restrain safely. It is my belief that, due to a lack of guidance, there is a lot of confusion about the best and appropriate use. I join with colleagues in asking for that guidance to be released, as the guidance for restrictive intervention for adults has also been released.

Before the debate, I mentioned to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk that I was at a school before Christmas where a young fellow was “difficult”, shall we say? It took two teachers to supervise and restrain him, and a degree of violence did take place. I mention that to illustrate the need for schools to have the necessary teachers, training and resources. They did have that in that school and that was good to have.

I read a briefing supplied to me by one concerned body called the Challenging Behaviour Foundation, whose research has thrown up a few surprising statistics that are certainly worth quoting today. The main source of data is a “5 Live Investigates” freedom of information request to local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales that revealed 13,000 physical restraints over the previous three years, resulting in 731 injuries. Only a fifth of authorities replied, so the information presented might not be the whole picture. Another source of data was a survey conducted by the Challenging Behaviour Foundation. Some 88% of the 204 respondents said their disabled child had experienced physical restraint, with 35% reporting that it happened regularly. Some 71% of families who completed the survey said their child had experienced seclusion, with 21% reporting that it was taking place on a daily basis.

Those figures are challenging and they tell us the real story. I believe there is a better way to prevent these kinds of issues. Issuing guidance is certainly one step, but it is not the whole answer. Classrooms must have sufficiently trained staff members to deal with these scenarios without disrupting the other 29 children in a class. Children who need additional help need assessments, and those assessments must result in extra help and support. Parents must understand what is happening and be able to provide a helpful insight into the best ways to understand a child. There are so many factors, but the guidance that has been on the cards since 2014 must instead be off the cards and taken into schools urgently as the first step to ensuring that the education of every child is the best that it can be.

4.36 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Children and young people are one of the most vulnerable groups in our society. Wherever they live, wherever they go to school, wherever they spend their free time, they require care

and protection. Children and young people with learning difficulties, disabilities and those in care are particularly vulnerable. Yet, as we have heard in this debate today, these are the people most likely to be subjected to restrictive interventions. Sadly, this often results in injury, trauma and other long-lasting consequences.

As we have heard, recent research has highlighted the potential damaging impacts of restrictive intervention. A Challenging Behaviour Foundation survey demonstrates the negative effects it has on children and their families. As we have heard, 88% of respondents said that their disabled child had experienced physical restraint, with 35% reporting that it happened regularly. The truly shocking bit for me, Madam Deputy Speaker, was that 58% of respondents said that the physical restraint had led to injury. In other words, it is doing more harm than good. Research has shown that there is a marked increase in the diagnosis of anxiety in children where restrictive interventions were used, and adverse life experiences during someone’s formative years drastically increase their chances of developing mental health problems.

Concerns about restraint have been raised by the UN, civil society and parents and carers of those affected. Beth Morrison was mentioned earlier. She is a constituent of mine from my city of Dundee. She has campaigned for over five years on this issue, after her son Calum was subjected to harsh restraint. Beth gave evidence at the Scottish Parliament’s Public Petitions Committee and has subsequently worked with the Scottish Government to develop their guidelines on restraint. Today, I would like to thank her personally.

The Scottish Government have taken action to strengthen their guidance on restrictive intervention. They make it clear that the use of physical intervention should only ever be used as a last resort. It should only be considered in the best interests of ensuring the safety of a child, as part of a de-escalation approach, and never for disciplinary purposes.

We all appreciate and understand the hard work and sacrifice of teachers and carers, and the duty of care they have for all those they look after. We know the pressures they are put under every day. We also have no doubt experienced an unruly child in the classroom—I am sure some of us in this room will understand that very well. We have met people who are unable to follow instructions, sometimes through no fault of their own, and we have met those whose fuse is that slight bit shorter than everyone else’s. In most cases, these situations are resolvable, but in others individuals can become a danger to themselves, to other children and to staff. Therefore, at the heart of the Scottish Government’s guidance is a clear framework on how to avoid challenging behaviour arising in the first place, how to de-escalate and avoid restraint, and how physical restraint should be used only if it is necessary and as a last resort. Staff use their knowledge and assessment of a child or young person to predict and plan for situations that can lead to challenging or distressed behaviour. They also seek to provide ongoing support for the individual, paying particular attention to any additional needs.

The guidance sets out the Scottish Government’s clear expectation that every local authority should have a policy on physical intervention, along with a process for how decisions on physical intervention should be made. All decisions to intervene physically are recorded to demonstrate that children’s rights have been taken

[Chris Law]

into account in the reaching of those decisions. The guidance refers specifically to the United Nations convention on the rights of the child. The Scottish Government have committed themselves to incorporating the convention's principles in domestic law. Their aim is to make Scotland the best place in the world for a child to grow up in, and recognising, respecting and promoting the rights of children is essential to achieving it. The core values in the UK Government's draft guidance largely mirror those in the Scottish Government's guidance, and we welcome that. However, the guidance must be published at long last: five years is far too long for anyone to wait, particularly those young children.

As we all know, human decisions have to be made at a particular time, in a particular place and in a particular set of circumstances. However, as I have said, physical restraint must be required only as a last resort, and it is vital that it is proportionate, measured and understood by all participants. As someone who spent time as a child in care, I have witnessed personally what restraining does to young people, and I therefore fully understand how important it is for it to take place only as a last resort. I also have a personal understanding of how difficult it is for those who have to use physical restraint as a last resort to make the right decision. It is imperative that children and young people know their rights, and that the actions of teachers and carers are always guided by the need to protect them.

Ultimately, clear guidance and good policy will lead to better decisions on more occasions. With the appropriate guidance and policy in place, we will hopefully see an end to the troubling stories and statistics that we have heard today and 'ensure that all young people, children and staff are kept safe.

4.41 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate. It was secured by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—who made an excellent speech—along with my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who gave some powerful personal testimony, as did the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law).

This is a difficult and, for some, very personal issue to talk about. I congratulate all the Members who have spoken, including my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed). Members will know that his private Member's Bill, known as Seni's law, was predicated on the devastating and inexcusable death of his constituent Seni Lewis in 2010. Seni had been restrained so excessively, so unreasonably, that he died. Seni's law addressed the issue of prone restraint—the act of forcing someone's face into the ground—and, as we know, Seni was not the first person to die in such circumstances. In 2014, during his time as a Minister in the Department of Health, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk issued guidance on the restraining of adults, with the intention that it should be followed by guidance on the restraining of children.

The national inquiry into child sexual abuse recently concluded that "pain compliance" was child abuse and should be outlawed, and the Equalities and Human Rights Commission has also argued that such methods should not be used on children. Article 19 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, which has already been mentioned today, states that Governments must do all they can to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and bad treatment by their parents or anyone else who looks after them. According to the BBC, these painful techniques were designed for prison riots, with the aim of forcing individuals to comply through the use of pain. I should not even need to say this, but we should not be using prison riot techniques on children.

What is also concerning, and constitutes the essence of the debate, is the continued absence of clear guidance from the Government. Although their consultation on draft guidance to reduce the need for the restraint of children took place between November 2017 and January 2018, we have still not received the results. Will the Minister tell us when they will be published?

Parents have argued that, in the absence of guidance and with the prevailing uncertainty, schools are using so-called restraint techniques against children with special educational needs and disabilities. That has occurred in an environment of austerity; one that has seen a crisis in funding for children with special educational needs. As we discussed in the previous debate, local authority children's services are currently overspending by £800 million. It was reported last November, for instance, that council overspending on children's special educational needs and disabilities has trebled in just three years.

The Minister might be aware that the Challenging Behaviour Foundation and Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland released a report in January on the use of restrictive intervention. The report found that 88% of parents surveyed said that their disabled child had experienced physical restraint, and 35% said that it happened regularly. Over half the cases of physical intervention or seclusion were of children between the ages of five and 10, with one case involving a two-year-old child. It should come as no surprise that this has had a negative effect on the children's health. Over 90% of those surveyed said that restraint had emotionally impacted their child. That physical intervention was for cases of incontinence, meltdowns and shutdowns—situations that leave children unable to communicate as they are so overloaded with emotions.

I will return quickly to the Government's own delayed guidance. When Ministers launched the consultation, they stated that any guidelines would not apply to mainstream schools. This is clearly illogical. Guidance must apply across the board, not just in specific settings. Otherwise, this suggests that mainstream schools are not safe spaces for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Will the forthcoming guidance be universal, so that all children are protected?

I would now like to move on to the treatment of young people who are autistic or have learning disabilities or mental health conditions. Across mental health, autism and learning disability services, over 1,000 young people were subject to a restrictive intervention in 2017-18. That accounted for 26,000 separate restrictive interventions. What is shocking is that the under-20s in these services who are subject to any restrictive intervention are, on

average, subject to more than twice as many as those in any other age group. There are also hundreds of young people who are subjected to seclusion, segregation and—perhaps most worryingly—chemical restraint. We are drugging these young people because their behaviour is deemed to be too challenging. That is not acceptable. I know that the Care Quality Commission is currently carrying out a review of the use of restraint in these services, but it will not report until next year.

Currently 250 young people who are autistic or have learning disabilities are being detained in inappropriate care settings that were covered by the Transforming Care programme. That programme was intended to move people out of inappropriate settings and back into the community. Since 2015, however, the number of young people in such institutions has more than doubled. Some of these children have been sent more than 100 km from home. Ministers have recognised that this is wrong, but they have not yet done anything to stop it. Moreover, the programme expired last Sunday. Can the Minister therefore tell us what plans there are either to continue the work or to introduce a new programme to close inappropriate care settings? What funding will be made available in the next five years, given that the Government have committed to funding only an additional year of the programme?

What happens in early childhood has a defining impact on human development, affecting everything from educational achievement to economic security and health. Violence towards children can leave a long, irrevocable shadow over their lives. There can be no place for it anywhere. I therefore hope that the Minister will take the contributions made to heart.

4.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I thank all colleagues who have contributed to the debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), who offered a very personal story, and the hon. Members for Croydon North (Mr Reed), for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Dundee West (Chris Law). I commend the Challenging Behaviour Foundation, which has been mentioned several times, and Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland for all the work they do, and Dame Christine Lenehan for the work she has done for my Department. I also congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing this important debate.

As has already been noted during the debate, any use of restrictive intervention is, quite rightly, always a sensitive issue. Restrictive intervention can have long-term consequences for the health and wellbeing of children and young people, and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk really brought that to life with the story of Fauzia, Stephen and Harry. It can also have a negative impact on the staff who carry out such interventions. It is never something to turn to unless there are very good reasons to do so. As colleagues have so eloquently said, the preferred approach should always be to use positive behaviour support and other alternatives that can de-escalate challenging behaviour and tackle the reasons for it at source.

I want to start by highlighting the guidance that is already in place for teachers around the use of reasonable force. The law and our guidance are clear that there are

situations where using reasonable force is necessary in a school environment, to make schools safe places for pupils and staff. For example, force can be used to prevent pupils from hurting themselves or others, from damaging property or from causing disorder. However, the law is absolutely clear that force can never be used as a punishment. Any policy on the use of reasonable force should also acknowledge any duties in relation to disabled children and children with special educational needs.

There are times when the only realistic response to a situation is restraint or restrictive intervention—for example, when a young child is about to run into a busy road, or when a pupil is hurting a teacher or child and refuses to stop when asked. The same would be true in a hospital if a child were hurting staff or other patients. Our starting point on any use of restrictive intervention is that every child and young person has a right to be treated with respect and dignity, to have their needs recognised and to be given the right support.

We also fully appreciate that some children and young people with conditions such as learning disabilities, autistic spectrum conditions or mental health difficulties may react to distressing or confusing situations by displaying behaviours that may be harmful to themselves and others. My hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed eloquently described the situation of her own son. Restrictive intervention may be needed to minimise the impact of their behaviour on themselves or on other people, but it should only be what is reasonable to deal with the situation, and proportionate to the circumstances.

Restrictive intervention should be avoided wherever possible. Instead, proactive, preventive, non-restrictive approaches should be used in respect of the challenging behaviour to tackle the issues early. Examples include providing an environment that does not overwhelm the child with noise or other stimulation, putting the right special educational provision in place to enable the child to learn effectively, and developing an appropriate behaviour management plan.

As the right hon. Member for North Norfolk knows from his time in government, guidance is in place to support health settings in helping to care for someone who displays behaviour that might be considered challenging. I would like to commend him for his contribution in this area. The Department of Health's positive and proactive care guidance, published in 2014, sets out how restrictive interventions should be used appropriately in health settings where there is a real possibility of harm to the person, to staff, to the public or to others.

I know that there has been deep concern in response to media reports in recent months about the use of restrictive interventions in mental health hospitals. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health has asked the Care Quality Commission to review and make recommendations about the use of restrictive interventions in settings that provide in-patient and residential care for those who have, or might have, mental health problems, learning disabilities or autism. We will be following the progress of this review closely.

Through our new compulsory health education, all children will be taught how to look after their mental wellbeing and to recognise when classmates are struggling. In addition, we recently updated our mental health and behaviour advice, which provides signposting and

[Nadhim Zahawi]

information on how schools can identify pupils whose behaviour may result from underlying mental health difficulties, adapt the approaches outlined in their relevant policies and, of course, adjust policies as appropriate to support pupils.

Positive and proactive care has been important in setting expectations about the use of restrictive interventions in health settings, but there were concerns that the policy did not say enough about children and young people and about settings beyond health. That is why the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care have consulted on new guidance to help with the prevention and management of challenging behaviour of those with autism, mental health difficulties or learning disabilities. We worked closely with a range of special educational needs and disability organisations in drawing up the draft guidance for consultation. We are working through some of the complex issues raised in the consultation responses and will, as many colleagues have requested today, announce our next steps shortly. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk and other Members, including the shadow Minister, asked about the delay, but the guidance addresses some sensitive issues, so it is only right that we have taken the time to engage with the education and health settings where it will apply.

We were clear in our consultation paper that restrictive intervention should be used only when absolutely necessary, in accordance with the law and clear ethical values and principles that respect the rights and dignity of children and young people, and in proportion to the risks involved. Restrictive intervention can never be a long-term solution, and we are particularly concerned about long-term or institutionalised uses of restrictive interventions, which several colleagues have described so harrowingly. We are aiming to support settings and services to develop their practice so that they have confidence to provide better support for children and young people with challenging behaviours and provide safe environments in which they can thrive.

While the guidance was written for special schools and specialist colleges, and focuses on students who have learning disabilities, mental health difficulties or autism, other settings may wish to use the guidance if they would find it helpful. The guidance is consistent with Ofsted's expectations of schools and care settings in relation to the use of restraint and restrictive intervention. Last year, Ofsted published guidance to inspectors entitled "Positive environments where children can flourish: a guide for inspectors about physical intervention and restriction of liberty", the thrust of which relates to the importance of proactive approaches to behaviour management and minimising the use of restrictive intervention. The fact that Ofsted developed the guidance is evidence of how importantly they take the issue.

I am enormously grateful to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk for raising such important issues today, and I hope that he is somewhat reassured that the Government recognise them. In making our final decisions on the guidance, we will consider the points made in the debate today, and I am grateful for the contributions of many colleagues. We have a real opportunity here to make a difference to the lives of some of our most vulnerable children and young people and of those who work with them, and it is crucial that we get it right.

4.58 pm

Norman Lamb: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate, which included some powerful contributions. The personal testimony from the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan) was telling, because the wonderful news is that her son is now at university. The Minister should note that, because not only will early intervention and positive behaviour support being embedded in the entire system give people the chance of a good life, but the state will save a fortune. That is why it is so important.

We need the guidance. It needs to have teeth and to be backed by proper accredited training and by mandatory recording and reporting across the system. The Government need to get on with that now, because we must end the scandal of children not being protected from abuse in the way that adults and those in health settings already are. It is unacceptable that children in residential schools and in other settings are not protected. As the shadow Minister said, the guidance must be comprehensive. There is no justification for leaving out some settings, such as mainstream schools. The guidance should apply to everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Department for Education to urgently issue guidance on reducing the use of restrictive intervention of children and young people; and further calls on Ofsted to change its guidance to inspectors to recognise the importance of seeking to avoid the use of those interventions with children and young people.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance because Buckinghamshire County Council passed a unanimous motion this afternoon asking for High Speed 2 to be paused until the notice to proceed, which has already been delayed to the back end of this year, has been approved. This is a significant request because such notice cannot be given until the management capability, the affordability of the contract and the robustness of the already-discredited business case have been proved.

My county and my constituency are suffering daily disruption and catastrophic environmental damage, and we have not even seen the detailed design of this project. There are continuing complaints about poor communication by HS2, and the urgency of this matter is that there is news that machinery has already arrived in the county to start destroying a very large number of mature oak trees.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to know whether you have had any notice from the Secretary of State for Transport that he will make an urgent statement justifying this environmental vandalism, and whether there are any opportunities, when there are such serious doubts, for this project to be halted. What powers do we have in this House to bring about that halting or pausing of the project?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order. As she knows, the point she raises is not a matter I can address from the Chair, except in so far as to say that I have not had any indication that the Secretary of State for Transport, or any other Minister, wishes to come to the Chamber today to address the issue.

The right hon. Lady is very well aware that there are certain mechanisms she can utilise to attempt to bring the Secretary of State, or one of his Ministers, to the Dispatch Box at the earliest possible moment to answer the questions she has put. Of course, the whole House notes, once again, her extreme diligence and perseverance in dealing with this very important matter on behalf of her constituents.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you very much for your guidance from the Chair. Would it be possible for the message to go out from this House today, and from the Chair itself, that there is a request for the Secretary of State for Transport to come to this House at the earliest opportunity, which I believe will be Monday, to explain why this environmental vandalism is continuing in our county before any notice to proceed on HS2 has been given?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Again, I thank the right hon. Lady for her further point of order. She has raised the matter in a most eloquent fashion and, as she knows very well, matters raised on the Floor of the House will, I trust, be notified by the Treasury Bench to the appropriate Department and the appropriate Minister.

As to the powers that are available to Ministers in the respect that the right hon. Lady asks, I cannot give her a direct answer but, of course, I will say that I would not be at all surprised to find that on Monday, the next time the House sits, she and perhaps some of her local colleagues have submitted an urgent question for the consideration of Mr Speaker.

Business without Debate

ADJOURNMENT (MAY DAY)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 2 May 2019, do adjourn until Tuesday 7 May 2019.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 9(6)),

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 10(2)(b), the sittings in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 7 May shall begin at 11.30am, shall be suspended from 1.30pm to 4.30pm and may then continue for up to a further three hours.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

Travellers in Mole Valley

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

5.5 pm

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I thank the Minister for being here as the last man standing. It is an awful position, one I used to have, too. However, this is an opportunity to raise a vexing issue that has plagued my constituency and Surrey as a whole. We are now in what we call the summer Traveller season; it is like a disease. Mole Valley constituency consists of Mole Valley District Council south of the M25 and the eastern wards of Guildford Borough Council. It is close to London and to Epsom downs, so it is attractive to Travellers from afar, and many of those come with a distinct Irish accent.

We have two distinct, different types of Traveller problem. The first involves those who suddenly appear and squat on a site. The second involves those who squat on a site that they say they own or have access to, and then proceed to openly defy planning regulations. The first group very occasionally have permission to camp—as I have noticed—use the site and then they leave it as it was found. That is rare, and normally things are quite different. This is exemplified by an incident at the end of March, when five caravans and various vehicles squatted on a public commuter car park near Leatherhead station. The council moved fast—or, rather, as fast as possible—and after a few days it served a section 77 notice for the caravans to move. Predictably, that was ignored and a couple of days later the police arrived in force and moved them on, with the council then doing the clean-up. This was a waste of time and money, and a blockage, with a loss of space, of a busy commuter car park.

Last Traveller season, Surrey had hundreds of these incidents, and Mole Valley had more than its share. Surrey's councils and the population accept the need for Traveller sites, but not without limit. Currently, the Surrey districts are working together to provide one or two transit sites, which will help the police and councils to justify their action. Elmbridge Borough Council, a Surrey council, has tried something revolutionary. It mapped every public space—churchyards, schools, playgrounds and so on—in Elmbridge and then obtained a three-year injunction against Traveller squatting on those mapped sites. That meant the police in Elmbridge could act straightaway, regardless of who the individuals were, and whom the vehicles and caravans belonged to. However, this approach has several downsides. As a member of the National Farmers Union, I note that no private land, including farm land, was covered by the injunction. The injunction was for only three years, and huge public efforts and expenditure went into setting up the maps. What this approach does provide is an indication that if such land squatting was criminalised nationally, as I believe applies in Ireland, direct action by the police could take place, whoever owns the land, although obviously at the landowner's request.

The second area of Traveller abuse relates to abuse of planning law. Mole Valley District Council and the Mole Valley constituency are smothered with building restrictions; we have sites of special scientific interest, areas of outstanding natural beauty, green belt and so on.

[Sir Paul Beresford]

This includes the Guildford wards next door. Any constituent from the settled community that builds without permission, particularly on land where these restrictions apply, can expect to be required to remove the development. Some of the Traveller community do not believe these laws apply to them—or they choose to ignore them. I wish to focus on how a very few of these Travellers manipulate the system in ways that would not be entertained by settled residents or by planning authorities. In saying that, I emphasise that there are a number of successful, popular Gypsy, Traveller sites in the constituency where there are no difficulties and no arguments, and where the community is integrated.

First, I shall touch on two long-standing examples. One is in Guildford, on a site on a narrow little private lane off the A246. The A246 is a busy road, but the lane is tiny and narrow, with few properties. Development is severely limited as it is an area of natural beauty, with ancient forests—it is green belt and so on. A Traveller from outside Mole Valley inherited the land, or access to it, squatted on it and, over a short period, placed a number of caravans, trucks and cars there and ran several different businesses from the site.

The second example is in Leatherhead, on green-belt pasture land. Since what I believe are Irish Travellers arrived at the site in 2003, which is a few days back, the area has been fenced, a fast-growing hedge has been planted, a number of caravans have been placed there and a few other buildings of a more permanent design have been built. To my amusement, two large, high, wrought-iron, electrically operated gates have been erected between pillars at the entrances. It looks like the entry to a minor stately home.

On both sites, it is apparently the norm that all injunctions have been ignored; numerous applications have been made, rejected and appealed; and relations with the local community are fractious, with numerous threats to community members. As I said, the Travellers arrived in 2003, so this has been going on for years, without success in ensuring that the planning laws respected by the settled community are not ignored or dodged by devious legal means by the people who have squatted there.

A third case commenced this Easter weekend in Capel. By chance, I drove past and came across the site. Going by the accent, it was probably a group of Irish Travellers, with two or three small caravans squatted on a two-acre field. They claim that they own the land, which may or may not be true. The land is accessed by a narrow agreed-access way over another person's land. The squatters bought in a small digger and widened the access way, and they wooden-fenced the widened way without the landowner's agreement. This morning, I observed that the fence has been taken down while the access is being further enlarged and re-fenced to allow through bigger vehicles, such as horse-carrying vehicles and bigger caravans. The standing passage right of way for this field specifically bans caravans.

The individuals have brought in a number of lorry-loads of hardcore, which was laid and spread by a fairly large JCB digger. The wooden buildings were knocked down to make space for what I understand are going to be new buildings, including stables. A local neighbour I talked to was threatened by the individuals in respect of the water supply, which I understand has been accessed

probably without the water company's agreement. Moreover, other neighbours have been threatened and told not to interfere or they will suffer severe retaliation.

The local council is seeking legal advice pending an approach to the courts. The Travellers have put in the usual foot-in-the-door planning application for caravans and stables for a horse business. This probably means that the council cannot act on any injunction until the application is heard, presumably reviewed, refused and then appealed. That will probably be followed by a further sequence of applications and appeals, and in around 20 years' time these people will have continued to breed there, raised their horses, increased the whole site, or at least the number of vehicles on it, and added numerous caravans and more businesses.

The behaviour is along the lines of what I have seen of the Mafia in Sicily. One might ask why these people would act in this way; the answer is, of course, because they can and nobody, including the courts, the police and the local authority, seems capable of stopping them. The Minister and his Department have been running a review for months, now running into years. It is time for a speedy and tough response.

First, in cases of squatting on possibly-owned land and the ignoring of planning regulations, I would like the Government to change the legislation to enable local authority planning officers to place an immediate stop notice on even minor development, with heavy fines and ultimately jail for failure to comply and return the land to the condition it was in before. Leave it to the Travellers rather than the local authorities to go to court if they wish to oppose the stop notice. Where Travellers squat on other people's land without permission, this should be made a criminal offence. That is how it is done in Ireland and it seems to work, enabling the police to take direct and immediate action.

Next, will the Minister consider tightening up the legal definition of Travellers? It is too loose at the moment, and one thing that those who squat do not do is travel. Related to that is the extraordinary requirement that the claim to need to live in caravans should overcome the normal and understandable offer of bricks and mortar accommodation. That is particularly relevant where children and infants would by normal standards be accommodated in a better and healthier environment in a normal dwelling. I have a number of other suggestions, but I will test just one more. Will the Minister enlarge on the definition of repetitive similar applications, so that these can be accumulated and rejected at a stroke?

There is a belief among many of the settled community who brush up against these individuals—that is a polite way of putting such contact—that such Travellers ignore normal law-abiding activity because the law is weak and ineffective. My experience supports that feeling. Change is years overdue; and, because of the Easter events, let me make a vain request: can any change be made retrospective to the day before last Easter? Over to you, Minister.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) on securing this important debate. Reading through the materials to prepare for this evening, I saw very clearly his long-standing

commitment to standing up for his constituents on, as he described it, this vexing issue. It was also clear that he has consistently pushed the Government to support his residents, and I commend him for that.

I am pleased to say that the Government take the issue of unauthorised encampments extremely seriously. Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing have listened extensively to the views of those in this House on this highly sensitive and important issue and recognise the strong feelings and concerns raised by many Members. Just as my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley has articulated powerfully about his own constituents, many other hon. Members have also highlighted the sense of unease and intimidation that residents feel when an unauthorised encampment occurs, the frustration at being unable to access amenities and premises and the waste left and cost once an unauthorised encampment has moved on. The Government were also troubled to hear about the widespread perception that the rule of law does not apply to those who choose a nomadic lifestyle and that the sense of available enforcement powers did not protect settled communities properly—all points that my hon. Friend has made on many occasions previously.

The Government therefore sought evidence on this issue through a formal and substantive consultation. Our “Powers for dealing with unauthorised development and encampments” consultation received more than 2,000 responses, and I am pleased to say that the Government published our response just a couple of months ago. Among the various concerns raised by colleagues in the House and members of the public, particular issues were highlighted regarding illegal activity, enforcement or the lack thereof, concerns about planning policy and the green belt, and concerns about outcomes for the travelling community.

I am confident that I speak for everyone in this House when I say that we recognise that the majority of the travelling community are decent, law-abiding people, but we need to ensure that the system is fair for all members of our communities. That means ensuring that everybody has the same opportunities, is subject to the same laws and is free from the negative effects of those who choose to break the law.

I am pleased to say that the Government response puts forward a package of measures to address those issues, including consultation on stronger powers for the police to respond to unauthorised encampments, practical and financial support for local authorities to deal with unauthorised encampments, support for Traveller site provision, and support for the travelling community to improve life chances. I thank ministerial colleagues in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice for their assistance in this work.

I will summarise the various strands of work that the Government are now undertaking. In doing so, I will respond to the specific points raised by my hon. Friend. I will first address my hon. Friend’s concern regarding intentional unauthorised development—in particular, how intentional unauthorised development should be taken into account when planning permission is sought retrospectively. In 2015, the Government introduced a policy that made intentional unauthorised development a material consideration in the determination of planning applications and appeals. As set out in our response, we are concerned that harm is caused where the development

of land has been undertaken in advance of obtaining planning permission; the Government have listened to my hon. Friend on this issue. The Government have now committed to consulting on options for strengthening this policy on intentional unauthorised development so that local authorities have the tools to address the effects of such development. This will help to ensure greater confidence and fairness in the planning system.

On a related matter, I reassure my hon. Friend that the Government remain committed to strong protection of the green belt, which my hon. Friend has also championed many times in this place. The Government have been very clear, through the national planning policy framework, that inappropriate development—including Traveller sites, whether temporary or permanent—is harmful to the green belt and should only be approved in very special circumstances. The document “Planning policy for traveller sites”, which was updated in 2015, makes it clear that personal circumstances and unmet need are unlikely to clearly outweigh harm to the green belt.

The planning system is of course continually reviewed, and I will take on board the comments made by my hon. Friend tonight as the Department looks at updating its guidance for Traveller sites to bring that in line with the national planning policy framework. Indeed, the Department always reserves the option of issuing planning practical guidance documents to fine tune our view on particular interpretations of planning guidance.

This Government are also committed to continuing to address the disparities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. As a result, we have provided £200,000 of funding for six projects that aim to improve outcomes in the areas of educational attainment, health and social integration. We have also funded 22 projects that support Roma communities across England through the controlling migration fund. Interventions include improving access to services, improving health outcomes, outreach and supporting children and English language learning. We have also provided two projects with £55,000 each to tackle hate crime against GRT communities.

I will finish by summarising our ongoing work on enforcement against unauthorised encampments, because I am aware that this has been a particular concern, as highlighted by my hon. Friend. I am pleased to say that we have identified a set of measures to extend the powers available to the police to enable unauthorised encampments to be tackled more effectively and hopefully to reduce the frustration felt by many constituents of my hon. Friend and others that these issues are not being dealt with as they would like.

As highlighted in our response to the recent consultation, the Government will seek parliamentary approval to amend sections 61 and 62A of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. These amendments will include increasing the period in which trespassers directed from land will be unable to return from three months to 12 months.

Sir Paul Beresford: Will that apply where the individuals concerned claim to own or actually own the land, or just on public-type land or other people’s land?

Rishi Sunak: This is a matter for the Home Office, which will soon be launching a public consultation on the specific nature of these measures. I am sure that it

[*Rishi Sunak*]

will welcome my hon. Friend's views on how they should be implemented and the detail behind them. I would be happy to ensure that his views are passed on to the Department as it constructs the consultation.

The amendments will also include lowering from six to two or more the number of vehicles needing to be involved in an unauthorised encampment before police powers can be exercised and enabling the police to remove trespassers from land that forms part of the highway, which is another very specific barrier that has been identified.

My hon. Friend said that England should consider adopting the Irish model to criminalise unauthorised encampments. Like many others, he notes that this process in the Republic of Ireland had led to an increased number of Travellers in this country, and many have urged the Government to adopt the Irish model. I would like to reassure him and all those interested in pursuing this that the Government will conduct a review of how this can be achieved.

My Department will support local authorities with up to £1.5 million of funding to support planning enforcement. Finally, my hon. Friend raised temporary stop notices. These allow local authorities to act swiftly

to tackle unauthorised developments, and I am pleased to tell him that the Secretary of State has confirmed that he is minded to extend the period for which these temporary orders can be put in place.

I am also pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the Secretary of State is looking forward to sitting down with him to discuss these issues in more detail and, in particular, to ensure we can learn from the experience of his constituents as we look to improve measures to tackle this greatly vexing issue.

I thank my hon. Friend for all his contributions to this debate. He should without question be commended for ensuring that the views and needs of his constituents are raised in this House with force and power and repeatedly with Ministers so that we can act to improve the lives of his residents through changing these policies. I hope that he feels reassured that the Government are listening to his concerns and progressing the commitments we made in response to the consultation. I look forward to working with him on these issues in the coming months.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 25 April 2019

[DAME CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Post Office Network

1.30 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Before we start the debate, I remind colleagues that the Post Office group litigation concerning in particular sub-postmasters and their contractual relationships with the Post Office is currently before the courts. In accordance with the House's sub judice resolution, reference should not be made in the debate to cases that are currently before the courts. I will allow discussion of the wider issues relating to the sustainability of the post office network—that is permissible—but I remind Members that I will intervene if I think they are overstepping the mark.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the sustainability of the Post Office network.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship yet again, Dame Cheryl. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate on the sustainability of the post office network and the many Members from all parts of the House who supported my application for it. I also thank my Hansard Society scholar intern, Rebecca Orbach, who worked so effectively in organising my application.

At the outset, I want to recognise and thank the sub-postmasters in my constituency, and across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, who work hard in difficult circumstances to serve our communities. I also want to acknowledge a hard-working sub-postmaster—they know who they are—for working across all parties to seek support for the future of post offices. Friends in the National Federation of SubPostmasters and the Communication Workers Union also deserve our recognition for their fight for the preservation of the post office network. Finally, I thank all those who have attended today's debate. I am sure that Members will agree that the post office is a recognised and important part of our respective communities and an institution that is widely recognised and respected across Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The post office is a valued public asset, as many of our constituents have made us aware. From the reaction of people in my constituency to the Crown branch closure in the centre of Motherwell and the temporary closure of the branch in the centre of Wishaw, I know that people and businesses not only use, but rely on their post offices and the services they provide. Their importance has underpinned the strong opposition in communities to the franchising of Crown branches and the closure of franchised branches due to poor postmaster pay.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady most sincerely on securing this important debate. Part of the problem in my constituency is that over the past year we have had temporary closures in Ogmore Vale, Aberkenfig and the community of Bettws. Those temporary closures are ongoing, with one of them nearing a year. Post offices provide banking services as well as the postal service, and they are often linked to local shops. Those services are important, given all the bank closures in my constituency. I have only one bank left for 58,000 constituents. Temporary closures are as much of a problem in my constituency as permanent closures. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Post Office needs to up its game in resolving those temporary closures?

Marion Fellows: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I will come to the point he raises further into my speech.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am more cynical than my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore); I have had a temporary closure that has lasted four years and I have four temporary closures. The Post Office knows that permanent closures get a lot of opposition, so temporary closures and downgrading Crown post offices to the back of WHSmith is its way of undermining the network while muting public opposition. I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is obviously not fooled in that way.

Marion Fellows: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have a temporary postmaster still in office in Wishaw after the sub-post office there was temporarily closed last year.

What the public are seeing is yet another managed decline of a valued public asset driven by a Tory ideology of non-intervention. The public are, through their elected Government, the owners of Post Office Ltd. They feel and have let their elected Members know that the Government should be driving action to ensure the sustainability and promotion of the post office network. I hope the Minister will outline not only the actions her Department has taken, but the further actions she will take in response to the concerns of communities, postmasters and Members here today.

The main issue undermining the sustainability of the post office network is the postmaster crisis. At the root of that is sub-postmaster pay. Scottish National party MPs and Members from all parties have heard over and over again from their local sub-postmasters about how poor pay is a leading cause of closures in their constituencies; I have even had sub-postmasters contact me from England to complain about the level of pay they are receiving.

The National Federation of SubPostmasters—the organisation that represents sub-postmasters across the UK—has said that two thirds of branch closures are due to sub-postmaster resignations, and they have attributed that to low pay. Sub-postmasters' general conditions are also poor, with as many as one third taking no time off at all last year.

A survey released this month by the National Federation of SubPostmasters found that one in five towns could lose its post office in the next year. Of the 1,000 workers surveyed, 22% plan to hand in their keys, pass on their branch or downsize. The Post Office's 2017-18 annual report states

[*Marion Fellows*]

that sub-postmasters' pay has fallen by £17 million in one year. That is a 4.4% cut. Sub-postmasters sustained a brutal £27 million cut the year before. Looking at postmasters' pay in the long term, we see that it has declined by £107 million since 2012.

As part of Post Office Ltd's North Star initiative to create a profit of £100 million by 2021, it used cuts to sub-postmasters' pay to increase its profits from £13 million to £35 million in 2017-18. That is while the majority of sub-postmasters earn less than the minimum wage for running a vital public service in their communities.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The issue has been raised by sub-postmasters across the UK, and I have had meetings with some in my constituency. My hon. Friend has talked about the job that sub-postmasters do. The sub-postmaster in Scotstoun, Ali Akram, has an old folks' sheltered housing complex across the road. He considers the work he does there to be a vital community service. He goes way above and beyond his actual job—he helps the men and ladies package things up and properly address them and so on—but when we consider the pay of sub-postmasters, that is not valued at all.

Marion Fellows: My hon. Friend is completely right, and I have heard many similar tales from Members from all parts of the Chamber. One told me that the sub-postmaster who served his mother actually helped her with her banking, going way over and above what he was paid to do. At meetings with sub-postmasters, I have been told how they feel driven to help their communities, but because of the limited pay they are getting, they feel they will no longer be able to offer that valuable public service.

The majority of sub-postmasters earn less than the minimum wage for running a vital public service. Our postmasters are being overworked and underpaid while Post Office Ltd is allowed to Hoover up their wages for its own profit, rather than properly remunerating the people responsible for that profit. What is the Minister's assessment of the Post Office's North Star initiative in general and in relation to the decrease in sub-postmaster pay? Postmasters are working hard for poor pay so the executive board can meet its arbitrary profit targets. There is no real pay-off to that, as it is fuelling the downfall of the post office network.

There is also no real strategy to deal with the crisis that the Post Office faces. Across the UK, 460 postmasters want to leave as part of the network transformation programme, but cannot do so until a new postmaster is found. Currently, there is interest, and interest only, in 90 of those branches, so 460 people are essentially being held captive because the remuneration rates are so poor that Post Office Ltd cannot find a new postmaster to fill the position.

I am aware that a deal has recently been struck that will increase remuneration on banking transactions, but that is only one small source of income for sub-postmasters, and it will not come into effect for another six months. What discussions has the Minister had with Post Office Ltd on remuneration for postmasters, and why is there a six-month wait before the new rates come into force?

Our postmasters need better pay now, and the whole postmaster contract, introduced in 2012 under a Tory Government, needs to be reviewed. Will the Minister commit to urgent action to review the whole contract?

In February, the Minister wrote to me to say that she would ask Post Office Ltd for the hourly rates effectively paid to sub-postmasters. Her Department must conduct an independent analysis of that. Given the poor treatment of postmasters by Post Office Ltd over decades, it is essential that the injustices that they have faced and the oppositional stance from Post Office Ltd management are not allowed to continue and influence any findings or outcomes. The attitude of Post Office Ltd towards postmasters has been shameful, and caused the loss of dozens of jobs and ongoing legal action that is now sub judice. I hope that the Minister will commit to an independent analysis of remuneration to sub-postmasters, and to a thorough review of postmasters' contracts.

Furthermore, our postmasters have already been paying the price for the executive targets of Post Office Ltd through poor pay. Any future unexpected legal costs payable by Post Office Ltd must not influence decisions on postmaster pay. Postmasters cannot be expected to continue to pay the price for the Post Office's shortcomings. The Government must, for once, put the interests of working people ahead of the aims and aspirations of an executive board and profit. I hope that the Minister will commit to ensuring that the outcome of any court case will not affect any potential new deal for sub-postmasters.

The consequence of poor postmaster pay is that communities are left without a branch and the services that they need. In response to a written question last month, Post Office Ltd confirmed that 1,016 branches across the UK are temporarily closed right now. Of all 12 regions of the UK, Scotland is the hardest hit by the postmaster crisis, with the highest number of temporarily closed branches—currently 134, representing 13% of all temporarily closed branches. That is 134 communities without something as simple as a post office, and 52 of the 315 branches with a temporary operator are also located in Scotland.

Temporary closures are affecting access. In 2017, Citizens Advice reviewed the Government's access criteria and raised two concerns, the first being that measuring proximity to a post office as the crow flies does not accurately reflect the distance that people have to travel. It estimated that, if more accurate measurements were used, the UK Government would have failed five out of six of their own access tests. This is an attempt to pull the wool over people's eyes. The number of branches operating in the post office network has been tumbling, which is greatly affecting people's ability to access post office services, both rurally and in urban areas.

The Post Office's own figures show, between 2014-15 and 2017-18, performances getting worse in five of the six elements used to judge performance. There is no doubt that the postmaster crisis is a driving force behind access to branches and quality service, so what are the UK Government doing to improve access, while maintaining quality services?

Crown branch closures have also affected access. People can no longer access the full service that they had previously at their post office. Since 2013, the Crown network has been cut by a massive 60%. Although Crown branches make up only a small percentage of the branches in the post office network, they have historically

represented 10% to 20% of the Post Office's overall revenue. They therefore play a crucial role in the network's past, present and future, and must be preserved. These branches are flagship stores in prominent locations, so the impact on local communities, and the network generally, of closing them can be massive. Smaller, franchised branches often do not have the same presence in communities, provide the same level of service or offer workers the same conditions. In 2012, a report from Consumer Focus found a drop in performance; it concluded that franchising resulted in longer queuing, poorer customer service and advice, poorer disabled access, and a reduced number of counter positions.

When Crown branches are removed from prominent places in town centres, that removes yet another reason for people to visit their high street. That in turn reduces footfall and the likelihood of people spending on our high streets, as opposed to shopping online. The businesses surrounding Crown branches often benefit from being near a post office, which affects their income. Speak to any person from any town and they will complain about the state of their high street and closed units. What assessment have the Government made of the impact of Crown branch closures on town centres?

It is not just communities and sub-postmasters who are getting a rough deal from the current strategy—so are workers who are TUPE-ed over from a Crown branch to a franchise. The majority of workers being TUPE-ed opt to leave the profession, and take with them their skills and experience. In 2014-15, only 10 out of 400 staff were TUPE-ed over to a new retailer. In 2016, only six in 200 were TUPE-ed.

The Communication Workers Union has expressed concerns about conditions and the loss of skills. New jobs with franchising partners such as WHSmith are advertised at lower rates than the very same jobs with Post Office Ltd. That affects not only workers and their families, but the economy of the local community. According to the CWU, it makes more financial sense for franchise partners to offer a settlement to get Crown workers out the door, and bring in new staff in fewer positions, on lower pay and with poorer conditions.

The UK Government cannot be allowed to shake off their responsibility. Just because jobs are franchised, that does not mean that Ministers can turn a blind eye to the lower pay and conditions. Ministers have a duty to staff working directly and indirectly for Post Office Ltd. Will the Minister take action to prevent a two-tier system, and to bring everyone up, not down, to the same standard, regardless of the type of branch in which they work?

WHSmith has informed the CWU that once staff are TUPE-ed to their franchises, the CWU will no longer be recognised, so new and existing staff are not only being given a poorer deal, but are not even being given the means of improving their situation. They are being told to like it or lump it. Every workforce must have the right to union recognition. A stipulation for any new franchise contract must be that unions—the CWU and others—be recognised. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that?

The CWU has also expressed concerns about the fact that WHSmith was voted worst retailer on the high street in a 2018 poll by Which?. It has appeared in the bottom two in the Which? survey in each of the last

eight years. With that rating, customers cannot expect quality service, and workers cannot expect a quality employer. Given that these retailers are carrying out roles on behalf of the UK Government as the special shareholder of Post Office Ltd, what is the Minister's assessment of the quality of the service and rates provided by retailers such as WHSmith?

The recent decision to turn another 74 Crown post offices into franchises in WHSmith stores is alarming, particularly given reports that franchising is occurring without consultation with existing local post offices, meaning that the competition risks further destabilising the network. There have even been cases where a new franchise was opened in a WHSmith that was less than five minutes away from a post office branch, without there having been any consultation with the existing postmaster. Such decisions can have a devastating effect on a postmaster's income, and can lead to a branch closing. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that sub-postmasters are listened to, and that their branch's sustainability is taken into account in the decision-making process?

Communities must also be consulted, and any consultation must be meaningful. When the Post Office "consulted" people in Motherwell about the franchising of the town centre branch, it was merely a rubber-stamping exercise; I conducted my own consultation, which found that the post office was well used and well valued by the local community, but the Post Office pushed on with its plans anyway. A proper consultation would have required Post Office Ltd to listen and react to what it was told, but it has not done so. Nor have the Government: they have constantly palmed off the public and hon. Members with claims that anything that relates to the Post Office is a matter for the Post Office. Can the Minister outline what major steps the Post Office has taken in response to communities' reactions to Crown branch closures?

Last year, the Post Office's director of sales and trade marketing told the all-party parliamentary group on post offices that it had no contingency plans in case WHSmith—a company with 14 years of declining sales—goes bust, which would leave communities with no post office and leave Post Office Ltd floundering, deepening the postmaster crisis. With 596 branches, Martin McColl is the largest retail operator, while One Stop has 179, so Post Office Ltd may be guilty of putting all its eggs in one basket. Can the Minister outline her Department's contingency plans in case the larger retailers fail and their post office branches close along with them?

The post office network is being gutted by Post Office Ltd, and the UK Government are allowing it to happen. If the UK Government see a real future for post offices as a "front office for Government", the physical network must be supported to maintain services and attract more people to opt in. More Crown branches are closing and more mobile post offices are being deployed, which is not attractive and does not represent the strong public institution that people once knew.

The machinery and skills needed to perform certain services are being lost as Crown branches close. Not only are private providers of services not opting in, but neither are the UK Government. The Home Office has chosen not to renew its contract for biometric services with Post Office Ltd, which means that fewer people are visiting their post office and less money is being spent.

[*Marion Fellows*]

I accept that a competitive tendering process has to be undertaken, but why has Post Office Ltd not been competitive enough?

Will the Minister pledge to speak to her colleagues in the Home Office and other Departments about what services they can provide through the post office network? In their response to the 2017 consultation on the post office network, the UK Government pledged to look at what new products post offices could provide. New products serve not only communities but sub-postmasters, who can increase their income. New services could therefore be a way of preventing the mass exodus of postmasters. Since publishing their response, what products have the UK Government introduced? What products are being examined?

The preservation of existing services is important not only for the sustainability of the post office network and sub-postmasters' incomes, but for particularly vulnerable people. For example, people who use Post Office card accounts to withdraw social security payments rely massively on that service. Typically, people are taken to a bank in their youth by their parents to open an account, but that is simply not the case for everyone, especially those who are most vulnerable. I have assisted constituents who needed to open a bank account but were unable to—not because they did not want to, but because they held no recognised ID, as they would then be pursued for debts and put in an even more difficult position. How do the UK Government plan to support those people when the card account contract expires in 2021? A commitment must be made to extend the contract, not just until 2024 but indefinitely. People must have the choice. Not extending the contract would be a choice by this Government to place yet more barriers in front of people to prevent them from accessing the support that they need.

One key way in which the network can achieve longevity is through banking transactions. The proposal from the CWU, in conjunction with Cass Business School, to form a post bank deserves serious consideration. With more and more banks closing in our communities, a post bank could be a viable public alternative that provided customer service on people's doorsteps and in their communities while larger banks are abandoning them. It would require vision as well as will from the Government, but right now they have no vision—only a strategy for managed decline.

If the UK Government truly see a future for the post office network in which it can continue to have a prominent presence in town centres, so that people can still access an array of services, there needs to be a clear strategy. That strategy cannot simply be cuts dressed up as efficiency, or privatisation disguised as modernisation. The UK Government need to step up to the plate and ensure that this public service meets the standard that the public expect. Their key pledges must be to review sub-postmaster contracts, drastically increase and improve services, halt and reverse Crown branch franchising, commit to union recognition and better conditions for workers, actually listen to communities and sub-postmasters, develop a contingency plan in case retailers go bust, and assess the impact of the current strategy on town centres and vulnerable groups.

Fulfilling those pledges would be a major step towards a sustainable and doable strategy. However, I and many others have a suspicion that the Tories are overseeing the managed decline of the post office network as part of a deliberate strategy to underfund the service, making it poorer in order to lower confidence in it and justify a full-scale privatisation of the network. If that happened, I am sure it would be met with the same public opposition as the Crown closure plans.

The SNP believes that post offices should remain in our communities, that the franchising of Crown branches should be halted and that Crown branches should be re-established, so that people can enjoy more and better services, workers and sub-postmasters can enjoy better conditions, the post office network's sustainability can be ensured and the commonweal can be served. A public service should serve the public, not the aims and aspirations of people on retailers' executive boards or of Post Office Ltd, which is profiting from the feebleness of the UK Government, who refuse to act.

The post office network is in a postmaster crisis. The strategy of non-intervention is not coherent. Communities, sub-postmasters, workers and the network as a whole need action—and they need it now.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. There are nine speakers on my list, including the Front Benchers. I am not minded to impose any time limit at this stage, but I wanted everybody to know the situation.

1.58 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing what is undoubtedly a very important debate.

I know from my constituents how important the post office network is to rural communities such as those that I represent in the Scottish borders. When the post office in Eyemouth closed temporarily last year, I received a huge number of complaints, letters and emails from residents worried about how they would access their benefits, pensions and other postal services. In fact, the reaction was as strong as the opposition to losing a local bank branch or another public service such as a local library. That desire to protect the local post office network needs to be put to good use. Local people certainly have a role to play in supporting their post offices, but I wonder how many people understand how postmasters earn a living. Perhaps we all need to do a better job of communicating that we all must use our post offices and spend money there as often as we can to ensure their survival.

I absolutely agree that the post office network provides an invaluable service, which needs to be protected. I find it hugely concerning that the National Federation of SubPostmasters has found that one in five sub-postmasters is considering closing or downsizing in the near future. What should our reaction and response be to that, and how should the Government react?

Tim McCormack, who lives in Coldstream in my constituency, ran the post office in Duns for a number of years. He has been a very vocal critic of the network

transformation project, and is calling for radical reform. There is clearly a need to look again at whether the current model has put post offices on a sustainable footing for the future. I urge the Minister and the Government to look closely at the issue. Do we need to increase the network subsidy? Can the Government do more to support postmasters who provide over-the-counter services on their behalf? For example, the Post Office's contract with the Department for Work and Pensions to provide the Post Office card account runs out in 2021. Will the Minister raise with Government colleagues the income and footfall that such services provide for postmasters, and press for the contract to be renewed for a further period?

I note your comments, Dame Cheryl, at the start of the debate about ongoing legal action, which is an important issue. I will not go into that case, but it is important that the Government consider the possible outcomes of that litigation, and how that might impact on the sustainability of the post office network. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw indicated, as banks have closed, a number of banking services have been transferred to the post office network. There would clearly be a big impact for many communities who are now completely dependent on the post office network if that network was not on the same footing as it is today.

Some have argued that the post office network in Scotland should be devolved to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. That is not something I support. That would cause all sorts of added costs, and would not in itself solve the problem. Of course, it is already open to the Scottish Government to provide financial assistance to post offices for providing non-postal services, so some extra support could be provided by Holyrood if—[*Interruption.*] Dame Cheryl, is this not telling? We are talking about a very serious issue here, which affects all our constituents, and all a group of SNP Members can do is to barrack and shout at someone who is trying to provide a constructive solution.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I am not going to allow any barracking. This will be a civilised debate under my chairmanship.

John Lamont: Thank you, Dame Cheryl. I am very grateful for your intervention. I think it is appropriate that we conduct ourselves in a civilised manner, and I am happy to do that.

Notwithstanding my concerns about the post office network, it is important to put the issue in context. Despite a significant reduction in the network subsidy since 2011, across Scotland we have lost just over 2% of post offices, which is roughly the same loss as has been experienced in England. In my constituency, we have lost two of 46 post offices. It is not the case that the network is falling apart.

The Post Office has gone from making a £120 million loss in 2012 to becoming profitable again, which is undoubtedly a good thing. I also very much welcome the recent announcement from the Post Office that it is increasing the amount of money it pays postmasters for carrying out banking transactions. That is clearly long overdue; the issue has long been a matter of complaint among postmasters in my constituency in the Scottish borders. I end by reiterating the importance of the post office network to rural communities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On rural communities, which is where the hon. Gentleman and I are coming from on this, should there not be an absolute commitment from this place, and from the Government, to safeguarding and securing what can be seen as the last bastion of social interaction for elderly and vulnerable people in isolated rural communities? The importance of that cannot be underlined enough.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman makes a critical point. For many communities and small towns across Scotland and the entire United Kingdom, the ability to access cash, financial services and benefits is critical. As banks and cash machines close, there are very often no other alternatives. It is critical that we in this place do something to ensure that people in those communities, including the most vulnerable older people, can continue to access such services, and to ensure that we can sustain our high streets, and shops and businesses in these communities, which are dependent on cash. The post office network is an important part of that. People are clearly using postal services differently, and that trend will inevitably continue, which reinforces the need for the UK Government to continue to monitor and review the sustainability of the network.

I conclude by again congratulating the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw on bringing this important debate.

2.6 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for securing it. We all understand the value and importance of having post offices in our communities. More than 2 million small businesses—62%—use them at least once a month. In rural areas, they are vital; 36% of rural businesses use post offices weekly. One in four of all businesses are registered in rural areas and contribute well over £200 billion to our economy. Citizens Advice has been clear that eight in 10 small businesses in remote rural areas will lose money if local post offices close.

We all remember around 2008 when post offices were gradually being run down under the Labour Government of the day and when the services our local post offices could provide were wrested away from them, paving the way for mass closures. Long before I was elected in 2015, in 2008, I remember going round the doors in my constituency asking people to sign a petition to save their local post offices. I and other party activists did that in Skelmorlie, Glengarnock and Kilwinning. Naively, we thought we could make a difference. It turned out the Post Office's so-called consultations were not much more than a sham. To make it worse, our then local Labour MP voted on five separate occasions under the Blair Government to close post offices across the UK and then immediately afterwards put out press releases to the local papers lamenting the closure of our local post offices. Sometimes it is not hard to see why people become cynical about politics.

Some post offices are now being closed by stealth. By that, I mean that postmasters are either retiring or shutting up shop because it has become so difficult to make a living out of the business, important though that business is for our communities. Postmasters in my

[Patricia Gibson]

constituency tell me that they were earning minimum wage. We know from recent announcements that as of October 2019—although I do not know why it is taking so long—our sub-postmasters will receive better remuneration from the Post Office for the key services that they provide for the public. The question is whether that improved payment is enough for the long-term sustainability of the service, and we will have to reserve judgment on that.

Postmasters tell us that they hand count thousands of pounds daily. That money is accepted, checked, double-checked, bagged, remmed out and sent away, for much less money than the banks charge their customers. The gap is large, which means that either banks or the post office are making a lot of money on the back of postmasters. That does not seem fair to me.

Our postmasters are taking on a greater role in our communities as banks abandon our towns. Post offices are an important amenity in our communities and offer a lifeline on everything from pensions to benefits and, increasingly, day-to-day banking services. In so many towns, our post offices are the last place where face-to-face services are still available.

We all understand how important it is that banks properly remunerate postmasters for the services they provide to major banks, which turn over huge profits, and I am pleased that there will be a near-threefold increase on current rates. However, some postmasters in my constituency say this simply does not go far enough, which causes me a lot of concern. Indeed, we are all keen to see if the details of this offer are sufficient to protect our postmasters and, importantly, the network's sustainability as a whole. I have been lobbying the Government and the Post Office chief executive about this for two years, so I am delighted that we have at last made some progress, but the devil will be in the detail.

I have spoken out about the threat to our post office network in four different debates since I was first elected in 2015—we seem to have them once a year. It is an issue that I campaigned on with Scottish National party activists in my community long before I was elected, and I will continue to do so until our postmasters get the fair deal that they deserve. Our post offices are too important to be left to flounder at the mercy of banks that are apparently too big to fail, and of successive UK Governments who have consistently failed to recognise the importance of post offices to our communities.

Jim Shannon: I want to put on record what a very good campaign the Scottish National party and others have run on behalf of the banks that are closing, and the importance of post offices in filling that gap. Over time, their campaign has outlined and highlighted the issue of banks closing at a fast rate, which means that the importance of post offices is increasing. It is so important.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that observation and very much welcome it.

Carol Monaghan: My hon. Friend talks about the importance of post offices to our communities. In fact, we talk about them as a public service. Does she share my concerns about hearing talk of profit or loss? Public

services cost money and must be invested in. We should not consider profit when we are talking about a vital community lifeline.

Patricia Gibson: When we talk about profits in relation to public services, there is always the danger that we understand the value of a pound, but not the value of something that cannot be measured in pounds, shillings and pence.

The failure to recognise the value of post offices to our communities can be seen in the fact that 74 Crown post offices have been franchised in WHSmith stores. There are reports that franchising is being done without proper consultation with existing post offices, which means that the competition risks further destabilising the network. There must be strategic consideration of franchising. In addition, it is deeply concerning that the Post Office appears to have admitted that there is no contingency plan in the event of the collapse of WHSmith, which has continued to decline over the past 14 years. There is no contingency plan should WHSmith collapse. What does that say about the strategic planning to protect our post offices? I suggest it says rather a lot.

The UK Government seem to have a pattern of abdicating responsibility for this matter, insisting that it is a matter for the Post Office. That paved the way for the Government to insist latterly that they could do nothing about the banks, which we owned as taxpayers, fleeing our towns. There is a pattern emerging here. At the heart of this debate must be the recognition that the post office network has a vital role in the day-to-day lives of many of our constituents—older people generally, and often the most vulnerable in society. The SNP believes that the Post Office must be more than a commercial entity and must serve a distinct social purpose. The Government must commit to a programme that ensures there are no post office closures, and urgently renew their funding of the network to safeguard its future.

Post Office branches are hugely important to older people. The services offered are a lifeline. People pay bills, access their benefits and get advice. Older people and those on low incomes make greater use of cash and banking services and bill payment services, and vulnerable groups and remote rural residents use post offices for informal community services, such as support and information—they are touchstones of our communities.

It is not good enough for the Post Office to have been managed into decline in the way it has been. For too long our post offices have been undermined and undervalued, and our postmasters underpaid. As a result, some of our most valued post offices are being closed by stripping away their sustainability and then earmarking them for closure. Now, in a new era, we need them more than ever. The neglect and indifference have to stop. It is time to pay our postmasters properly and to stand up for them. It is time to stop the rot and see our postmasters for what they are: community champions who are often not missed until they are gone, struggling on to survive in a hostile business environment where making a living of any kind is increasingly challenging. That needs to be recognised and saluted.

The Minister said in a recent Adjournment debate that her Government support postmasters, and that this is evidenced by a pledge in their election manifesto. I

hope she is listening and will discuss with her colleagues in Government what more she can do to show their support than just having a line in a manifesto. We need a positive and concrete set of actions.

2.15 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this debate. Before I became an MP, we stood together to fight for the Brandon Street post office in Motherwell. It was a very good Crown post office and well supported by the local community—even more so by the local shops, which got involved in collecting petitions. They did a very good job, but it was not good enough for the Post Office.

I want to make hon. Members aware of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am currently on a five-year career break from Royal Mail, where I worked for 28 years before being elected to the House. I am a proud member of the Communication Workers Union, and I wish it all the best for its conference in Bournemouth next week. I welcome delegates in the Public Gallery, who are here to hear this debate.

Throughout my career as a postal worker, I have seen at first hand the clear benefits of having Royal Mail and the Post Office as a unified public service serving all communities across the UK. That is why I fought against the privatisation of Royal Mail for over 20 years. I resisted attempts by successive Governments to fragment and privatise postal services. However, the Tory-Lib Dem coalition was eventually successful in privatising Royal Mail in 2013. They sold off a vital public asset that serves the public good, and undervalued it in the process—it was the biggest post office robbery. There are competing estimates of the real cost of privatising Royal Mail; one suggests that it cost taxpayers around £1 billion.

I have said it before, and I will say it again: Royal Mail was not for sale. I am proud that the next Labour Government have committed to bringing Royal Mail back into public ownership. It is time that Royal Mail once again runs in the interests of the people, and is not used to maximise private profits. Despite the privatisation of Royal Mail, Post Office Ltd was kept in public ownership, but recent years have been marked by constant attacks on the post office network. The result has been a steady fall in the number of Crown post offices since 2013, and they now make up just 2% of the overall network. Some of those closures were justified by arguments about protecting other post offices from closure in the future. We accepted that, but we now face a new threat to our Crown post offices: franchising.

The Government are planning to sell 74 Crown post offices to WHSmith through the franchising process. Is WHSmith a suitable company to take on the responsibility for providing postal services? As we have already heard, it is a company that consumers voted the worst retailer on the British high street. Far from sustaining the post office network, franchising will further its decline. Does the Minister still consider WHSmith an appropriate franchise partner for the Post Office in the light of its seeking to derecognise the CWU, which supports the interests of all staff, including the postmasters? I hope she can provide an answer.

Staff will have to endure low pay and cuts to their terms and conditions, and consumers can look forward to lower service standards. However, I am encouraged by the public, who are fighting back against the threat posed by franchising. Some 92,000 people have signed a petition in support of the CWU's Save Our Post Office campaign—Labour is on their side, and I thank them for signing the petition. We will end post office closures and stop this unnecessary franchising process in its tracks.

The Government have said that modernising the post office network is vital to ensure its sustainability, yet the modernisation programme has been a smokescreen for post office closures and staff redundancies, and is failing on its own terms. Post Office revenues are falling—revenue from Government, mail, retail and financial services all declined in 2017-18. The truth is that the post office network is struggling because of a loss of post offices and staff through the alleged modernisation. We have lost many skilled workers.

We cannot allow the post office network to decline further because communities across the UK rely on it. The Government's own survey of the post office network in 2016 found that 95% of people use a local post office at least once per year. Almost 60% were unaware of any alternatives to post offices when it came to assessing standard postal services. If the Government continue to push the post office network into decline, the most vulnerable people and communities in our country will pay the price.

It is important to reflect on the fact that the post office network has changed in many respects. One of the most notable changes is the growing role of sub-postmasters, who now run 98% of the post office network, yet the Government expect them to run their post offices with ever-decreasing levels of funding. The Post Office's 2017-18 annual report highlighted that there has been a 4.5% reduction in funding for sub-postmasters. I have been contacted by many sub-postmasters in my constituency who have felt the reduction in funding—one in particular. The sub-postmasters in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill are angry.

I was recently contacted by a sub-postmaster who wanted to share his experience. His staffing costs are significantly higher than the remuneration that he receives from the Post Office Ltd. As we lose bank branches, residents increasingly rely on his post office to carry out their banking transactions. That is proving costly and time-consuming, yet no financial support from the Post Office Ltd is available to him to provide those banking services. On his behalf, I ask the Government to review commission rates and remuneration for sub-postmasters. I hope the Minister is listening and will take that forward.

If sub-postmasters are not properly supported, I fear we will see the loss of more post offices in our communities. That is not just a threat; it is what we are being told. Public demand on the post office network is changing, particularly as a result of the loss of banking services in communities across the UK. Banks are closing, and post offices have to pick up the pieces. I welcome Labour's commitment to establish post office banks, including 300 in Scotland.

I pay tribute to the work of the CWU, of which I am a proud member. I have stood alongside CWU reps and members in many disputes, fighting proposed post office closures and cuts to staff terms and conditions. I will

[Hugh Gaffney]

continue to stand alongside them inside and outside this House. The fight to rebuild a publicly owned and unified postal network continues. It must be won for all communities across the UK.

2.23 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, for this important debate on the sustainability of the post office network. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing it and on her excellent contribution, which highlighted the ongoing crisis in the Post Office and the pressure faced by those who have to work in extremely difficult circumstances to deliver a service on which so many of our constituents rely.

There have been some excellent contributions, none more so than that of my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). The Government should be in no doubt about the strength of feeling about this issue and the support that the post office has from Members of all parties. I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, who said that the post office network is being run down and set up for future privatisation, which would have absolutely catastrophic consequences, particularly for those of us who represent and live in rural communities.

I hope the Government take heed of what is being said here today and start to show the level of commitment required to sustain—and, indeed, grow—the post office network. As we have heard, it is a lifeline service for many people living in rural areas, such as my constituency of Argyll and Bute—a vast area covering more than 7,000 sq km and taking in 26 inhabited island communities.

I have my doubts about whether that will be the case. Last month, when responding to an Adjournment debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), the Minister said that, under this Government, the post office network is

“at its most stable in decades”,

and that

“Government funding required to sustain the network has drastically decreased and is set to decrease even further in future years.”—[*Official Report*, 27 March 2019; Vol. 657, c. 477.]

That is not the message that my constituents want to hear from the Government. The Government have achieved what they describe as stability, but we in Argyll and Bute have lost 20% of our post offices in the past 13 years. In the past two years, six post offices have closed their doors, yet the Government still say they plan to decrease funding drastically in the coming years. We can have no faith in them.

Our rural communities know how important local post offices are in sustaining already economically fragile parts of the country. I am afraid that, as with so many other areas of their lives, when it comes to protecting the rural post office network, they can have no faith that the UK Government will act in their best interests.

It is not just the ongoing threat of closure that threatens many of our rural post offices, but the additional workload being placed on them as high street banks

abandon rural Scotland as fast as their desire to make a quick buck will carry them. In the time remaining to me, I want to look at the effect that bank closures are having on the rural post office network. Small rural post offices, which are often community-run, were not designed, and are simply ill-equipped, to replace long-established banks. I want to use as an example the community post office in the village of Cairndow.

Cairndow sits on the shores of Loch Fyne, and is situated 10 miles from Lochgoilhead and Inveraray. Several years ago, the community identified the need for a post office in the village, and in 2015, thanks to the dedicated hard work of local people and Here We Are, a local third-sector organisation, the people of Cairndow celebrated the opening of their brand new community-run post office. The new venture has been hugely successful, and I pay tribute to the people at Here We Are and the entire community of Cairndow for what they have achieved.

It is not all good news. Because of a seemingly endless programme of bank branch closures in Argyll and Bute—most notably, the Royal Bank of Scotland's decision last year to close the last bank in the town of Inveraray—what was a small community-run post office designed simply to meet the needs of a small rural population has become a replacement bank.

Although the post office at Cairndow has always been more than happy to provide a banking service to small local businesses that cannot manage the 60-mile round trip to the nearest bank in Dunoon or Lochgilphead, it fears that it is now in danger of becoming swamped. It has become the bank of choice for many large international businesses that operate in the local area. It reports that its levels of cash-handling have gone through the roof in recent months, as has the amount of time staff have to devote to it. So much of its time is now taken up providing banking facilities for people: it feels that its core business—providing a post office service—is suffering as a result. As we have heard, it is not even as if the efforts to provide that extra service are well rewarded. It is being asked to fill the gaps left by high street banks as they desert rural Scotland.

After all, it is that post office, along with other rural post offices, that has to shoulder the burden of all the additional security concerns. It now holds a great deal more money than it ever had before, and it has had to put appropriate measures in place for the increased cash on the premises. Despite all that extra banking work and the extra security concerns that come with it, it receives scant reward for providing that increased level of service. As one leading member of Here We Are at Cairndow said to me just yesterday,

“We didn't set this up to become a community bank. We set this up as a community post office, and now we feel as if we are subsidising both the bank and the Post Office.”

When the Minister responds, I would appreciate it if she advised those people at Cairndow that something practical will be put in place to ensure that they are able to continue as a community post office, rather than having the burden of being a replacement bank forced on them. Despite the loss of 20% of my constituents' rural post offices in the last 13 years and the funding cuts that the Minister has announced, will she provide a cast-iron guarantee to them that there will be no more post office closures in Argyll and Bute?

2.31 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate. I was pleased to go along to the Backbench Business Committee—my old hunting ground—to support her application. I am delighted that she spoke so well to set out the many issues that post offices face, both now and in the future.

In my own work on post office sustainability, I have concentrated on two things: the deeply unjust banking transaction rates paid by the banks to the post office, and the definition of community post offices, which is unfair to many post offices that are community in practice but not in definition. I was encouraged by the level of interest in those issues in my recent Adjournment debate.

I take this opportunity to apologise to the Minister: my 12-and-a-half-minute speech ended up taking nearly 10 minutes longer than that because of the sheer number of interventions—it was one of the more popular Adjournment debates. That left her insufficient time to respond to the many points and questions that were raised. Hopefully, she will have sufficient time to answer those questions today.

I pointed out during that debate that negotiations were under way between the banks and the Post Office on remuneration. I asked the Government, as owners of the Post Office, to apply pressure to ensure that the rates were fair. That uplift would help ensure the sustainability of our local post offices. On that occasion, the Minister did not give any indication that they would do so, perhaps because of the lack of time. That debate followed a long engagement with concerned sub-postmasters in my constituency, and I know that other hon. Members have had plenty of engagement in their constituencies across Scotland and the UK.

I have been in almost constant engagement with the Post Office on this matter, and I wrote to Ministers and 16 of the biggest banks. The majority of banks responded positively, but one of our biggest banks said that it was not directly involved in negotiations, and that UK Finance was representing the industry and could give further details. That was news to UK Finance, which said:

“UK Finance is not party to negotiations and therefore cannot comment on the specifics of what is a commercial matter.”

I wonder whether that bank—I will not say which bank for fear of embarrassing it, but it is one of the UK's biggest—was actually party to those negotiations at all.

Despite all that, I was very pleased that last week, following the constructive engagement of the National Federation of SubPostmasters, many Members of this House and the CWU, the Post Office announced that, from October 2019, it will raise the rates of payment that sub-postmasters receive for taking personal and business banking deposits. Those increases represent nearly a threefold uplift on current rates and were warmly welcomed by sub-postmasters at the NFSP conference.

That is a great win for post offices, and, as my hon. Friend said, it is a significant first step towards securing their long-term financial future. One wrinkle remains: the different rates passed on by Post Office Ltd to the various types of post office—local or community, for example. Further engagement with Post Office Ltd on that issue is still required to ensure a level playing field.

That announcement came during the NFSP conference, which resulted in other good news in that, for the second year running, the NFSP Mails Segregation Team's work has improved sub-postmasters' mails segregation performance, resulting in a bonus payment of £1.8 million that will be shared among sub-postmasters. The NFSP has said that it will continue to work with their sub-postmasters, with the aim of increasing the size of any future payment and, as I said, it welcomes the changes to this key area of remuneration, which are a significant first step.

The NFSP stressed, however, that there are still some areas of concern to be addressed, including the level of public and business knowledge of the many services that the Post Office provides. Now that it receives a fairer deal for providing some of those key services, it is to its advantage to provide those services to a higher number of customers. That is especially the case with banking services.

Another area of concern, which has been mentioned, is safety. Further changes are required to help protect postmasters from the risks associated with handling large volumes of cash. That has come up in my visits to local post offices and meetings with sub-postmasters.

As we have heard, the post office is a community institution in Scotland and across the UK. As countless household names slip away from the high streets, the post office remains ever present, providing not only postal services, which have become a declining proportion of its business, but benefits administration, banking services and useful public spaces, fewer and fewer of which are now available.

Many of our post offices face increasing pressure and long-term financial uncertainty. In our modern, digital world, with Amazon, online groceries and deliveries, and online banking, many of our small village and town centres—particularly in rural and semi-rural areas—face systemic degradation and challenges unlike anything they have seen before. That comes at a time when large and profitable banks are upping sticks and leaving the high street, so that the Post Office, which already had an important role in our communities, has only become more important and prominent.

The community designation of post offices is a good thing. The Government currently provide funding, administered by the Post Office, to many small town and village post offices once they have received that designation. Designations have to have rules, and the problem is that many rural and semi-rural post offices miss out, while some city post offices, which do not need the additional assistance, meet the criteria. The rules by which branches qualify are set by the Government.

In theory, that funding is supposed to protect those post offices that are the last shop that can provide post office services to the community. However, those criteria are perhaps a little too black and white. One criterion is the distance from any given post office to the next one—a three-mile minimum that is calculated in total ignorance of the situation on the ground. Two post offices in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North are affected by that: in Bridge of Weir and in Houston.

The Bridge Community Centre in Bridge of Weir—where, incidentally, I have a constituency advice surgery on Saturday morning at 10.30, should anybody need

[Gavin Newlands]

any assistance—[*Interruption.*] Other surgeries are available, I am sure. That centre is the perfect model for what a real community post office should be; it is run by the local community for the local community. However, because of the three-mile rule, it does not qualify for any community designation funding. The public transport links, which were previously poor, have been slashed in recent months. The centre also does not qualify because there are other retailers in the village who could provide that service, but the fact is that no other retailer in Bridge of Weir wanted to take on the Post Office franchise.

The next closest post office is a 10-minute walk from the nearest bus stop, assuming that someone has been able to catch one of the very infrequent buses and has waited God knows how long to get a bus back to the village. The community was left with a choice: have no local post office, or take it on themselves. They chose the latter, and should be commended for doing so and provided with some assistance. The situation is made worse by the importance of local post offices to the elderly and those with additional support needs. Many people who fall into both groups may already have extra difficulty getting around.

Today, and at other times, I have heard similar stories emerging from other constituencies. The community subsidy remains vital and supports many branches that might not otherwise be commercially viable. Under current plans, the Government subsidy to the Post Office is due to be cut in the coming year and to end entirely in 2021. I strongly urge the Minister to reconsider that course of action, or many more community post offices will close and many communities be left with no post office and no bank.

As we have heard, post offices are closing, and those closures disproportionately affect Scotland. Forty post offices closed in Scotland between 2011 and March last year, compared with 297 in England. When we take population into account, Scotland's closure rate is one third higher than that south of the border. Given Scotland's unique and challenging geography, which includes 94 inhabited islands, keeping viable post offices in place is clearly of even greater importance to Scotland than to other parts of the UK.

In conclusion, we must recognise that the local post office is disproportionately important to small towns and rural communities. It has been an institution and often a community lifeline through centuries of change and turmoil. The modern age has not made things any easier for the post office, but I am confident that if the right action is taken it will continue to play its important and irreplaceable role.

I agree with many colleagues from different parties that privatisation is not the answer to that challenge—the Post Office must remain in public hands—and the Government must recognise their role in it. Yes, a Post Office banking deal is a large step in the right direction, but there is plenty more to do, and for my constituents one decisive action that the Government could take swiftly is to review the community designation to pay fairly and pay the right people so that more post offices remain sustainable and stay open for our communities.

2.41 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate on a critical issue facing many of our constituencies and the nation as a whole.

If we reflect on the decade since the financial crash, in order to avoid wholesale collapse of the UK's banking system, there has been increasing reliance on the post office network, but an unsustainable model is being visited upon that network. Earlier this year, I met my local postmasters—who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) pointed out, now represent 98% of post office provision—and they were concerned about the franchising model for the Crown post offices. Of the post offices in my constituency, Possilpark across the road from my constituency office is franchised to a grocery shop; Springburn is still a Crown office but has been actively advertised for franchising; Dennistoun was franchised last year and is now in a grocery store; and Millerston closed and only recently has been advertised for franchising, so that it can reopen.

I first met the chap who took over the Crown office franchise in Dennistoun during the consultation. He was very upbeat and optimistic. He is a young man, an entrepreneur, looking to make a good go of it as a small businessman. I thought that his ideas sounded interesting, and he had some impressive plans for how to lay out the new facility across the road as part of a grocery shop. When he came to see me again earlier this year, I was saddened to hear how he had been “totally conned”—his words—by how the contract was set up.

The main concern was the viability of operations because of the reduction in funding and resource. For example, postmasters now have to rent ATMs at £8,500 per year, with business rates on that. The stores' income from these machine is only £7,500 per annum, so postmasters pay £1,000 a year to run them. That is madness from their point of view. Why on earth would they do that?

The Government have invested £1.3 billion in the post office network, but I am afraid that that money has not fed down to the franchise holders. The withdrawal of RBS entirely from my constituency was followed by the recent announcement that Santander will close its last branch in the constituency. It has said, “Don't worry: the post office network will take up the slack,” but that network does not look too resilient, and it certainly does not look like it has a promising prospect of picking up the slack.

Banking contracts with the new post office franchises have changed. Postmasters used to receive 70p per £100 to provide banking services, but they now only receive 31p per £100, which is clearly a massive change and financially unsustainable. That has combined with the huge restrictions that have been imposed on credit unions extending their bonds so that they can bail each other out. In the past few months, my constituency has lost a credit union. Previously, other credit unions could rally around to share capital so as to avoid one union failing, but the big banking lobbies have prevented that with the current restrictions. As a Co-op MP, I see a picture in which changes to commercial banking, restrictions on co-ops and the huge undermining of the post office

network have been severely detrimental to local finances. That combination has been a toxic recipe for the provision of banking services across this country.

Earnings for post office franchise holders and sub-postmasters have been eroded to such an extent that they believe that cash starvation will lead to the closure of many post office outlets. They think that post offices should go back to the model in which they were run as Crown offices. Many of them clearly cannot wait for the franchise contract to end, so that they can simply walk away from it. It is so toxic for them that they cannot wait to throw away the key and board up the premises. That is the sad situation. At the start, there was a great deal of hope, with entrepreneurs trying to make a fist of it, but they were undermined by how the contracts have worked out, which is a great tragedy.

Postmasters in my constituency believe that their ability to provide a service and employment in the area has been severely eroded, and that retail operations within the franchises are not enough to avoid closure and to survive. It is a real cliff edge. The worry is that when this phase of contracts expires, we will see a massive collapse in the post office network. This is a ticking time bomb. Unless the Minister recognises the cracks that are appearing in the structure of the system, we will see a massive failure of the post office network within the next five years. The Minister needs to be aware that a crisis is brewing in that network.

If the Minister is interested in dealing with the situation, the contracts should be renegotiated—as the sub-postmasters who saw me believe—to allow not only service provision but the ability to earn a reasonable living. That is not a great ask of Government. They just want to run a business that is genuinely sustainable, and to earn a small profit—a living—so that people are happy. That is not how it works now, because the dice are loaded against them.

The CWU, of which my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill is a proud member, actively opposed the franchising of the Crown post offices. However, the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters was in essence bought off by Post Office Ltd—sub-postmasters were paid into, but part of the conditions of those payments was that the national federation would not undertake any activity that undermined the reputation of the Post Office and brought it into disrepute. It is a trade union in name only—it is a sham.

If the Minister is serious about proper scrutiny, sub-postmasters need to be given proper independent recognition as workers, and to be allowed to organise in proper trade union fashion. That would be a helpful measure to improve scrutiny of the system. Employees of the post office network believe that they are 39% underpaid for their efforts. Clearly, where there is underrepresentation of workers and organised labour, there is underpayment and exploitation, and as my local sub-postmasters illustrated to me, that is exactly what has happened.

The situation reflects the wider issues of investment in banking in this country. In 2016, public and private investment levels in the UK stood at 17% of GDP. We are ranked 24th out of the 28 EU countries, and a pathetic 118th in the world rankings. That is a shabby

record for the UK, and it speaks to the wider crisis in our economic potential as a country. We need to get a grip of that urgently.

That is why I welcomed the post bank proposal released at the beginning of April, which gained great press attention and traction as a credible and costed idea that would not only ensure the sustainability of the post office network, but create a reliable high street banking facility owned and run for the public interest. It is a plan to revolutionise the banking ecosystem, and to address the serious issues that we face, by, for example, ending the failing partnership between the Post Office and the Bank of Ireland. That partnership was forged after a massive public bail-out of the bank, and a condition of it was an exit from business banking activity. As a result, the Post Office is not able to grow its market share in small and medium-sized enterprise lending, and to help the growth of local businesses, which is stifled by a lack of lending. If we combine that with the restrictions on the credit union network, we see a recipe for constraining the growth of our economy and business activity in the UK.

That issue would be a priority for the new post bank, which would be welcome news for the sub-postmasters in my constituency and many others around the country. The post bank, which would be seeded with £2.5 billion in capital, is not controversial at all. Indeed, 65% of the public support the reintegration and renationalisation of the Royal Mail and the post office network as a unified whole. The UK's own version, Girobank, was privatised as part of the great fire sale of assets by the Tories in the 1990s, even though a fifth of people worldwide have banking services through post office networks in their respective countries.

The new model for the post office network would be larger by far than any of the existing bank and building society networks. There would be 300 branches in Scotland alone. A post bank would be embedded in local communities, and would be given a decentralised decision-making structure, and a specific mandate to support small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprise, tackle financial exclusion and promote inclusive economic development. It would be a lending arm of the proposed new national investment bank that Labour also plans to launch, and therefore would lead to a wholesale restructuring and repositioning of the UK economy, enabling patient finance to be seeded in our communities, and enabling greater vitality in communities that have seen significant industrial and economic decline over the last 40 years.

A solution is clearly at hand that would save our post office network and provide banking services where high street banks have disappeared. It would use a new banking model that is far more sustainable and will lead to far greater stability, growth and prosperity across the United Kingdom. I urge the Minister to take those proposals seriously, if she has any serious interest in addressing the crisis facing our post office network and those who work in it.

2.51 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this debate on a matter that is

[Drew Hendry]

critical for many communities in Scotland and the other nations of the UK. She talked about the respect for, and recognition of, post offices. Few things upset communities more than a post office closure. She also pointed out the folly of the Tory Government's non-intervention policy, and the parlous state of sub-postmasters, following the cuts that they have had to endure to their livelihoods.

My hon. Friend rightly mentioned that it is good news that there is a new banking transaction deal, but why the six-month wait? There is no good reason for that. It should happen now. She talked about the consequences of poor pay, and the 1,016 temporarily closed branches, 134 of which—some 13%—are in Scotland. She talked about the effect of Crown branch closures, and the failure of the franchising system to recognise unions, which others mentioned, too.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) talked about his worried constituents and the desire to protect the network. It is a telling figure that one in five sub-postmasters is considering closing or reducing their services. His speech was good up to then—until he said, as is usual for the Tories, that he wants the Scottish Government to pick up after the failure of the Westminster Tory Government, without the powers or levers to be able to do so.

John Lamont: My point was that powers are available to the Scottish Government to support the provision of financial services through the post office network—a point that the Library has just confirmed. There are opportunities available to the Scottish Government to provide additional assistance beyond what the UK Government can provide, because post offices are a reserved matter. There are levers and powers available to the Scottish Government, if they choose to use them.

Drew Hendry: I do not intend to go too far off track, but I must respond. It is absolutely typical of the Tories to say that we have to fix every mess and failure at the expense of the Scottish public and services in Scotland. That is a ridiculous proposition.

Returning to the core debate, there was enormous consensus among hon Members. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) pointed out that businesses across communities lose money if post offices close. She said that people are cynical about the politics of the Westminster Government, who make no commitment to post offices and then wring their hands at the consequences. She talked about hand-counting thousands daily, and everything that involves. She talked about the post office being the last place for face-to-face contact in communities. It is more than just a commercial entity, and older and more vulnerable people are the most affected by closures.

It is telling that Later Life Ambitions, a pensioners' organisation, points out that the post office is important in day-to-day life, because older people, who are often the most vulnerable people in society, rely on post offices. They are a lifeline; they offer access to pensions and benefits, and let people pay bills, get advice and even socialise. Does the Minister acknowledge that this is a social issue, too? For those who do not or cannot communicate digitally, post offices are very important. They are used by 42% of consumers over 65, and 31% of disabled consumers.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) talked about working with my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, and about post offices needing to be run in the interests of people. That is absolutely correct. In talking about franchising policy, he highlighted that WHSmith has been voted worst retailer. It is notable that the jobs it advertises are particularly low-paying.

In a very telling speech that hit home with me as a fellow MP representing a rural community in the highlands and islands, my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) shared concerns that post offices are being run down and prepared for privatisation. He talked about the catastrophic effect that can have on rural communities, particularly in the highlands and islands, where often there are huge distances between the services that people rely on. My hon. Friend talked about the stability policy of the UK Government; Argyll and Bute has lost 20% of its post offices, with six post office closures in the last two years. The drastically reduced funding has put post offices in a very vulnerable place, and the public have no faith in the UK Government protecting rural post office services. He was also right to point out the success of Cairndow, and to congratulate those people on taking matters positively into their own hands to try to do something for their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) talked about the transaction charges, and so he should, because his work should be commended. I congratulate him on forcing action, not only through his Adjournment debate, but through continued pressure and engagement. He talked about the impact of the systemic degradation of services in towns and villages and, importantly, the issue of community designation. It is a good thing to have community designation, but the problem is that rural and semi-rural post offices are losing out, while cities can gain. The criteria are too black and white, especially the three-mile rule.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) talked about the unsustainable model imposed on the post office network, and shared his concerns about franchising. When there are bank closures in our communities, we have all been told, "Don't worry; the post office network will pick up the slack." He also talked about the toxic conditions for the people who run post offices, many of whom got into the job because they thought it was a great thing to do for their communities, a proper career and a valued position in the community. My goodness, how they have been let down by how they have been treated. He predicted a massive failure over the next five years if there is no action.

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Post offices are not just business; they are focal points for many communities. This issue is about communities and their health and wellbeing, as well as the national and local economic impact. For many, the shiniest jewel in the crown has been prised out and cut up for the profit of those who do not rely on or even need a post office. In 2017, Citizens Advice found that people valued their community post office more than a local pub, a bank branch or a library. Does the Minister acknowledge that importance? In rural areas, 36% of businesses use post offices at least weekly, and 62% of small businesses use them at least once a month. Over 500,000 businesses

are registered in rural areas—that is one in four companies—and they contribute more than £200 billion to the economy. These people are creatives and innovators who use post offices to send goods and pay bills. According to Citizens Advice, eight out of 10 of them will lose money if local post offices are closed. Will the Minister take notice of that?

We in the SNP—and others, as we have heard—are clear that we want our Post Office to remain robust, and to serve our businesses and communities, but that is not a priority under the UK Government's management. Consequently, the Government should devolve power to us to ensure that the Post Office is protected. Under the current policy, there has been a mass exodus of postmasters, often leaving communities branchless. My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw should be commended for arguing for fair hourly rates for postmasters, but the Minister must undertake to commission independent analysis and answer the big questions about fairness.

As we have heard, pay levels are leading to a major exodus of postmasters. Rather than watch the Post Office crumble, the UK Government should support postmasters and ensure fair remuneration. As was pointed out, the publicly owned Post Office's North Star initiative is aiming for a £100 million profit by 2021. That is all very good, but postmasters' pay has declined by £107 million since 2012. The majority of postmasters now earn less than the minimum wage. In many cases, they cannot even get out; their businesses are now too unattractive to sell.

The National Federation of SubPostmasters has raised the issue of sub-post office closures with the UK Government and the Government-owned Post Office Ltd. The federation's spokesperson said:

"Our records show around two-thirds of closures are due to the resignation of the sub-postmaster—and a survey of our members conducted earlier this year gives an insight into why sub-postmasters are resigning. Income is dropping over time, the majority earn less than the national minimum wage for running their post office—and therefore earn less per hour than their staff—and as many as a third took no time off last year.

We agree with Marion Fellows that Scotland has been hit hard by sub-post office closures. This is a particular problem for rural areas in Scotland, as well as across the UK, where people rely on their local post office for vital postal and banking services."

Action on transaction charges is welcome, but why wait? Why not give the same rates to local branches and main post offices? Around 90% of post offices in the highlands and islands are local branches, not main post offices. Will the Minister challenge that with the Post Office? As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw pointed out, there must be a vision for the post bank, and it should be properly funded.

There is more pressure on post offices than ever, given the loss of local banks through short-sighted closures by the Royal Bank of Scotland, Halifax Bank of Scotland and others. Now we find that TSB is starting the process of shortening hours, which is always the cynical first move in reducing a branch's viability to the point where its closure can be justified. As we heard, all those banks say, "It's okay, you can use the post office," but we cannot if they have gone.

Even where post offices remain, Robert Cockburn, a constituent of mine who runs the post office in Drumnadrochit, says the workload is absolutely punishing. He often has to run his business as a single-manned

operation, so while he goes behind the screen for the time it takes to deal with a transaction, he loses out on custom from people who come to his business and might have bought goods to help sustain him.

Brendan O'Hara: While we have been sitting here, I have received an email informing me that yet another bank branch in Argyll and Bute is planning to cut its numbers ahead, I believe, of closure. The TSB branch in Dunoon now says its customers have to travel what it calls 7 miles to their nearest branch, seemingly unaware that that journey involves a ferry and a bus. Yet again, it is death by 1,000 cuts to financial services in rural Scotland. Will my hon. Friend join me in utterly condemning that latest move.

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I join him very robustly in condemning that move. As I said a moment ago, shortening hours is the first step towards making a branch unviable so it can no longer do business. The call then goes out, "Don't worry, the post office will pick up the slack." As we know, that is not always the case.

My constituent Mr Cockburn says it is punishing to run his post office. He told me:

"It is a combination of everything. The work that we have is onerous and does not pay enough money to cover your time. The business banking, for example, we get paid 23p per £1,000 that we count. That's nothing. You think, on minimum wage, how long it takes you to count £1,000. If you make a mistake or"—

more commonly—

"if the customer's made a mistake you have to double check it. We get paid for taking a parcel over the counter, but the Post Office took 6% away from us on that because they gave us a faster printer and said we could print labels faster. It's ridiculous."

A rural post office gets to print a label faster, and the Post Office cuts its money for doing so. That is ridiculous.

The UK Government must ensure that there are more incentives for new and existing postmasters to maintain and open post offices. Union officials rightly have been clear about the folly of closing Crown offices and franchising the service. As we have heard, franchises often advertise jobs at a lower rate than the Post Office pays. As the all-party parliamentary group on post offices found, the Post Office has no back-up plan in the event of WHSmith failing to deliver the service.

I hope the Minister has taken clear cognisance of what has been said during the debate by people representing their constituencies and communities, the vulnerable people who need these services most, and the postmasters who are being forced into subsistence living and locked into a business they simply cannot afford to get out of. This is a matter of having a social conscience and ensuring that communities have something they can rely on, not just now but into the future. If post offices are going to have to pick up the slack of bank closures and other things, they should be allowed to become sustainable in order to do that job.

3.7 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) on securing this important debate. She is an ardent advocate for her community and speaks passionately about the importance of post

[Gill Furniss]

offices to our local communities. I also thank the CWU, the National Federation of SubPostmasters and all those individuals who work very hard in a cross-party and collegiate way—they know who they are.

The post office is an important bastion in our local communities. It is a long-standing British institution, trusted and loved by the public. It is there for individuals as well as local businesses. Polls by Citizens Advice and others show that the post office is one of the most important services in the local community and, as many have pointed out, it is vital for rural communities. One in five rural residents said in response to a Citizens Advice survey that they would lose contact with friends or neighbours were it not for the post office.

Importantly, post offices are often a lifeline for older people in our communities. Later Life Ambitions, an umbrella group representing more than a quarter of a million pensioners, is clear about the significant importance of the post office to the security, independence, mental health and wellbeing of older people. It stated:

“The Post Office matters to older people both for the services it provides directly to them, but also for the role it plays in supporting the local businesses on which older people often rely.”

Indeed, at a time when our high streets are struggling, the post office is an important economic backbone for our local high streets. It offers small businesses the opportunity to do business locally and provides that important link that ties in the community. More than ever, we need to protect and encourage the growth of post offices. Unfortunately, the Government are overseeing a managed decline of the service.

Since 2010 we have seen cuts to branches and services and a fall in remuneration for sub-postmasters. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw told us eloquently—and scandalously—of the 1,016 temporary closed post offices throughout the UK, which is a terrible state of affairs for the communities affected. Most notably, we have seen a significant reduction in the Crown post office branches: the high street branches that provide the widest range of services, that are easily accessible for local communities and are inclusive of people with disabilities.

Over the past five years the Post Office has announced the closure of 150 Crown post offices, which is 40% of its 2013 Crown post office network. Most have been transferred to retailers such as WHSmith to install a counter for post office services in other premises. Although that retains a level of provision in the area, it is often done in the face of substantial local opposition and with a significant reduction in services, accessibility and well-paid jobs. The removal of high street branches away from view is contrary to economic sense. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was unable to attend today, but she has made important points about her local post office, which was in a prime location in York, but is now being moved into a WHSmith in a more remote area of the town, where shops are closing and where the level of footfall is not as high as it was before. In some cases, post offices have been relocated to retail units close to existing ones. I can speak for a sub-postmaster in my constituency, where another outlet was allowed to open a post office about a mile away from his business, and he is really seeing the hardship of that and wondering whether he will be able to continue.

Furthermore, transferring post offices to retailers such as WHSmith could be perceived as risky in a climate that has seen our struggling high street stores closing at alarming rates. At an all-party group on post offices meeting in October last year, I was surprised when Post Office executives gave me and other Members no reassurances of any contingency planning in the event of difficulties facing WHSmith. I urge the Minister to provide us with an insight into what assessment she has made of the long-term sustainability of that partnership as a matter of urgency?

As the modernisation programme continues, we are also seeing a gradual retreat of Post Office financial services. Instead of growing services, only last month it announced it will close the Post Office Money current account, which serves 21,000 customers. And the end is in sight for the Post Office card account, which will hit many people hard if they are in vulnerable circumstances and do not have the income to open a bank account in a high street bank.

Rural communities in particular rely on the post office to access financial services. Removing those services leaves consumers vulnerable to even further financial exclusion. To have a sustainable future, we have to be bold and brave about what our post office can offer. That is why I am delighted that the Labour party has announced we will set up a post bank to deliver banking services through post office branches, including relationship banking with small businesses. By utilising the extensive network of post office branches, the post bank would have by far the largest branch network of all UK banks. The report that has looked into the matter estimates that more than 3,600 post office branches are suitable to provide banking services, or would be with a small amount of capital investment. With the branches spread evenly across the country, every community would have easy access to face-to-face banking in their local branch of the post bank.

We have to recognise that we must invest and encourage our trusted institutions and not let them down. Does the Minister agree that a post bank could form a creative and bold answer to the long-term sustainability of the post office network and to the receding presence of banks on our high streets?

Beyond the closures and the fall in services, we also see the Post Office squeezing hard-working sub-postmasters' remuneration. Sub-postmasters play a significant role in the running of the post office network. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) told us about his postmaster who felt conned into setting up the business and could now face financial ruin and also hardship to the community that he set up to serve. It simply does not make sense. Some 98% of the post office network is run by sub-postmasters—mostly individual, independent business people—but remuneration for sub-postmasters has fallen in recent years.

In its 2017-18 annual report, the Post Office reported that the amount paid to sub-postmasters had fallen by £17 million since 2016-17, a reduction of 4.4%. The fall in remuneration is pushing them out of business, and many have to endure months of below minimum wage pay, all under the party that claims it is the party of business. What assessment has the Minister made of the remuneration for sub-postmasters? Can she share any insights with Members of the House? Does she not agree that the Government should carry out an urgent

review to prevent more closures and more hardship, and the terrible tragedies of people who have set up a business in all good faith then facing financial ruin?

In this debate, there is an elephant in the room. I thank the Minister for meeting me to discuss the matter privately, where I was able to raise my concerns. As we know, a group of sub-postmasters has launched a legal case against the Post Office on an issue surrounding its IT system. I do not want to go into details as the case is ongoing and will probably last until 2020. As I highlighted earlier, there is a relationship of trust between the public and the Post Office. It appears that some light has been shed into some of the practices and behaviour that appear to run deep into the psyche of the organisation. I hope the Minister will consider that a broader review into the management and governance structure of the Post Office, and whether the Government have fully exercised their oversight functions, or whether those powers need to be significantly strengthened, might be required to assure the public and to commit to the long-term sustainability of the network.

I have outlined only some of the matters that bring into question the long-term sustainability of the post office network. Many Members have made their views known in this and previous debates about how those matters exercise the communities that they represent. To secure a hopeful future for it, we must address the issues. We have to address the closures by ending them and the declining financial services by being bold and creative. We have to address the retention of a network of experienced staff by ensuring that they are properly remunerated and looked after. Finally, we have to address the issues raised in the justices' findings by reviewing the overall governance of the Post Office.

3.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), and the hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), on securing today's important debate on the sustainability of the post office network.

As I have said many times before, I am always happy to challenge the Post Office on specific concerns that MPs have at constituency level. I am therefore grateful to hon. Members for their contributions. It is encouraging to see that all sides of the House share common cause in ensuring that a vital national asset continues to serve our constituencies for many years to come. It is because of the key role that post offices play in service to their communities that our 2017 manifesto committed to safeguarding the network.

Brendan O'Hara: Will the Minister join the consensus across the House to support the retention of the post office network in public hands?

Kelly Tolhurst: If the hon. Gentleman would allow me the courtesy of getting to the content of my speech, that would be really useful. I am still at the start. We made a commitment in our 2017 manifesto and are committed to safeguarding the network. The Post Office is publicly owned and it is a commercial business operating

in competitive markets. The Government set the strategic direction for the Post Office to maintain a national network, accessible to all, and to do so in a more sustainable way for the taxpayer. We allow the company the commercial freedom to deliver that strategy as an independent business.

I must point out some of the language and words used in the debate, such as "managed decline" and "undermining the network", and the idea that it is ideological of the Tories to run down post office branches. As the Minister responsible for post offices, I find that incorrect and inaccurate. I do not regard Government investment of £2 billion over eight years as a so-called managed decline or undermining of the network, and I do not regard the establishment of 450 new locations since 2017 as managed decline or an undermining of the network. As hon. Members have outlined, at the end of March there were 11,547 branches. That number is as stable as it has been in many decades, so I refute those claims.

Patricia Gibson: I hear the Minister's objection to the term managed decline, and that is fine. We are allowed to disagree with each other in this Chamber; we have that privilege. However, there is no plan in place in the—I think not unlikely—event that WHSmith completely collapses. It has declined over 14 years. Would she care to take that up?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment, but I highlight that WHSmith has been successfully running post office franchises since 2006. We are now in 2019, and the reality is that, in any franchising service and any business, work is always going on behind the scenes in regard to the management of the network. There is a massive network of 11,500 outlets throughout the country. As the Minister responsible, I will, quite rightly, challenge the Post Office on any issues I am told about. I am committed to maintaining that network.

I have highlighted that so early in my speech because ever since I have had this role I have been clear at the Dispatch Box and in any debate that I will talk to any MP about issues they have in their constituency about post office branches. I will also talk to anyone about the Post Office and take those issues forward to challenge it. I will also defend the Post Office when required.

Several hon. Members rose—

Kelly Tolhurst: I give way to the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

Drew Hendry: The Minister is making a powerful statement of commitment, but she has heard from around the Chamber the pressures faced by local post office sub-postmasters living on subsistence terms and struggling to maintain a living. Will she bring that enthusiasm, energy and commitment to sorting out their livelihoods and securing their post offices?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, because that is exactly what I hope to do.

Gill Furniss: I want to continue on the point about contingency planning. At an APPG meeting some months ago, when we questioned the management who had

[Gill Furniss]

turned up to talk to us about various things, it was clear that they had no contingency plan whatsoever should WHSmith fail. It is okay to say they have been doing it since 2006, but so have NatWest, HSBC and TSB, and now we see them disappearing from the high street. It is crucial that the Minister takes that seriously. If she did not know that the Post Office had no contingency plans in place, its keeping her in the dark is a serious omission on its part.

More generally, at that APPG meeting the management told us that the consultation was not worth the paper it was written on and that they would not take notice of any views from individuals or communities. Indeed, the only reason they were asking was to see whether there were any comments on disabled access. I asked them why that was the case, because they have a duty of care to look at disabled access and to listen to communities.

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand where the hon. Lady is coming from, but the reality is that 98% of the post office network is franchised. That is the fundamental business model within the Post Office and its distribution of services. The hon. Lady makes a presumption that WHSmith will fail, and its franchises will therefore be under threat. That does not take into account the potential future development of the Post Office and how we are challenging it. However, as I have outlined today, and in any conversation I have had with any colleague, when hon. Members highlight something to me, I will, as the responsible Minister, always raise that with the Post Office.

In my day-to-day role, I will always challenge the decisions and workings of the Post Office. However, while we are the Post Office's shareholder, it is commercially run, so it is within its rights to manage operational delivery, but it is for me to challenge, oversee and raise questions where I believe work is needed to resolve matters.

Hugh Gaffney: I will keep it short and sweet: will the Minister ask WHSmith why it will not talk to the CWU, and ask it to talk to the CWU to represent members properly?

Kelly Tolhurst: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about the CWU and perhaps the conversations with WHSmith, but the union's relationship with an independent retailer such as WHSmith is a matter for it. It is not for me to direct an independent business. I know the hon. Gentleman and his passion for this subject well, so I am sure he will do all that he can, in his role and with his experience, to ensure that communication takes place.

Gavin Newlands: I had the time to advertise my surgery on Saturday in my speech, and I look forward to attending the Minister's Tea Room surgery, where we can discuss some aspects of my speech in more detail. For the public record, will she give me and the people in Bridge of Weir and elsewhere in my constituency a commitment at least to look at the community designation of post offices? I am asking her to commit not to changing that but to looking at where there may be shortfalls.

Kelly Tolhurst: I am always happy to look at the details and where we can improve services if that is possible. I must point out that the post office network is long established and well loved. We love the people who work in our post office network: the sub-postmasters and the workers—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members might heckle, but we do. The Government definitely do, and rightly so.

I have outlined this afternoon my personal commitment to the post office network, as we did in our manifesto, to see where we can improve it and where we can all work together to secure the future sustainability of a strong network throughout the country. There are challenges ahead, just as there are within retail. They are not insurmountable, but the challenge for us is to work with all of our stakeholders to tackle those and secure the network for the future.

The facts clearly show that the Post Office has made substantial progress over the past decade. The inhibiting cultural legacy of being a lesser partner to Royal Mail, with high public sector costs, has almost disappeared. As a business, Post Office Ltd is increasingly profitable and takes action to consolidate and defend its position in the market. Between 2010 and 2018, we backed the Post Office with nearly £2 billion to maintain and invest in a national network that had 11,547 post offices at the end of March. That extensive network gives the Post Office a unique reach among service providers. The Post Office currently meets and exceeds all the Government's accessibility targets at a national level.

Patricia Gibson: I appreciate the amount of investment that the Minister is talking about; it is clearly a lot of money, although people might want a debate about whether it is enough. In spite of that investment, does the Minister understand the concerns raised today? In Scotland 22% of the entire post office network has closed over the past 15 years. Surely she, like me, laments that figure because of the scale of loss it represents.

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is right to raise those concerns. She is also right that we are concerned about any particular closures that may happen, as is Post Office Ltd. That is why Post Office Ltd works hard—it always works hard—where there are unforeseen closures to make sure that those branches reopen. Since I have been in post there have been a number of examples where I and local MPs have worked with the post office network and local communities to make sure that new facilities are opened.

Where there have been closures, I would always encourage people to raise them with Ministers and to work with Post Office Ltd to make sure that we can sustain the network. The hon. Lady is right to have concerns, but she is wrong to say that the intention is not to renew those branches and not make sure that the network is stable in Scotland. There is a commitment and a desire to achieve that.

Government investment has also enabled the modernisation of over 7,500 branches, added more than 200,000 opening hours per week and established the Post Office as the largest network trading on Sundays. In terms of services provided, the Post Office's agreement with the high street banks enables personal and business banking in all branches, ensuring that every community has appropriate access to cash and supporting consumers,

businesses and local economies in the face of bank branch closures, particularly in rural and urban deprived areas. I encourage the House to look closely and objectively at these facts; they show unequivocally that the network is at its most stable and is much more sustainable today than in 2010.

We are not complacent. Post Office Ltd has to keep exploring new business opportunities to ensure a thriving national network for the benefit of communities, businesses and postmasters up and down the country. One of the most important and visible aspects of the Post Office strategy is its franchising programme. I accept that some communities have a strong emotional attachment to Crown post offices and naturally there will be concerns when proposals come forward to franchise their local branches, but our high streets are facing unprecedented challenges and the Post Office is not immune to them. Just like any other high street business, it needs to respond to these pressures and adapt to changing customer needs.

Franchising has reduced the taxpayer funding that the Post Office requires from Government, while maintaining—and, in some instances, improving—customer service levels. In fact, the report by Citizens Advice in 2017 indicated that franchised branches are performing in line with or better than traditional branches. I reassure hon. Members that, as part of its ongoing monitoring role, Citizens Advice will continue to track the impact of post office changes on consumers and on customer satisfaction in respect of post offices. Citizens Advice also has a formal advisory role in reviewing changes to Crown post offices across Great Britain that are relocated and franchised.

Serving rural communities is at the very heart of the Post Office's social purpose. There are over 6,100 post offices in rural areas and virtually everyone living in such areas is within 3 miles of one of those branches. Last year, a study by Citizens Advice found that seven out of 10 rural consumers buy essential items at post offices and almost 3 million rural shoppers—that is, 31% of rural residents—visit a post office on a weekly basis, compared to 21% of people living in urban areas. The importance of post offices to rural areas is illustrated by the fact that almost half have community status. They are the last shops in the village, as hon. Members have outlined. Rural post office branches, whether main, local or traditional, can offer the same products and services as urban ones of the same category.

The Post Office recognises the unique challenge of running a community branch and supports those postmasters differently from those in the rest of the network. They receive fixed remuneration, as well as variable remuneration, to reflect their special situation. In addition, the Post Office delivered almost £10 million of investment via the Community Fund between 2014 and 2018. That enabled community branches to invest in their associated retail business. The Post Office has now launched a smaller community branch development scheme that will benefit an anticipated 700 branches. Let me be clear: this Government and the Post Office will continue to support rural post offices.

Some hon. Members raised concerns about the rates of remuneration paid to postmasters, especially for banking services; I, too, have been and continue to be concerned about that issue. While the contractual relationship between Post Office Ltd and postmasters is an operational responsibility for the company, I care

deeply about the issue and I am determined to make sure that running a post office remains an attractive business proposition.

We offer post offices several ways of doing that, including the development of services for the future. My challenge to people thinking of taking on a franchise or a post office is to make sure that they deliver the services demanded by consumers and therefore enable post offices to continue to be relevant in today's market, given the way consumers use services now compared to the past.

I have committed to meeting interested parties, including the Post Office Ltd and the National Federation of SubPostmasters, more regularly so we can ensure that particular issues, case studies and direct concerns are discussed and challenged on a more frequent basis, and we can all work together. Everybody in this room and all our stakeholders want to see the Post Office thrive and develop in the future. Some Members may regard me as having a different ideological view: there may be different ways of getting there, but the outcomes should remain the same.

Gill Furniss: The Minister talks about her passion for post offices and how everyone will work together. Would it not make more sense to have a review of how things are working at the moment? As I and others have mentioned, having a friendly little chat probably will not work. We urgently need a proper review of the governance and management and of the remuneration of sub-postmasters.

Kelly Tolhurst: I appreciate that the hon. Lady would like me to announce that we will hold a review, but fundamentally, as I have outlined, the Post Office is a commercial entity operating in a competitive market. It is owned by the taxpayer, and it is right that we are challenged and that it is run efficiently.

I point out that the Post Office has been making a surplus. We now have a sustainable network and a surplus. We have moved on from a time when there were more than 7,000 post office closures and the Post Office was over £1 billion in debt. We are not in that place today. That has been achieved by maintaining the network and investing correctly. However, I have tried to show that I understand hon. Members' concerns about the viability of postmasters and their pay. I hope I have already outlined and expressed my determination to get to the bottom of some of these challenges and to ensure that they are addressed by the Post Office.

Drew Hendry: The Minister is being generous in taking interventions, and I appreciate that. She speaks passionately about her commitment to investigating this, and has commented that she believes the network is sustainable and well invested in at the moment. Will she take that a step further by coming to speak to some of the people running local post offices, particularly in the highlands and islands? They might not recognise the fact that they are within three miles of communities or that they have that kind of investment, because that is not their lived experience. Will she take up that invitation?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that invitation. I do speak to postmasters and, if time allows, I will be happy to go and visit post offices in any part of

[Kelly Tolhurst]

the country, if possible. However, we really need to look at the network and understand the operation. Post Office Ltd operates more than 11,547 stores—a sustainable network. In many of those circumstances, there will be particular differences. Of those stores, 98% are franchises, which in effect are businesses in themselves. It is acceptable to expect that there will be some churn and there will be particular issues that need to be dealt with.

Gill Furniss *indicated dissent.*

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady shakes her head, but that is the reality. I apologise to her, because she is always very courteous to me in the many debates we have. At some stage or another there will be issues with a number within the network, and it is right that those are raised and that we deal with them. This is not something I like to accept, but sometimes there will be cases that cause problems, and the right course of action is to have debates such as this, to challenge me or whichever Minister is responsible and to ensure that we work to ensure that those particular branch or constituency issues are dealt with.

Part of the changes to the network involved moving from fixed and variable remuneration to a fully variable basis, based on transaction fees. That means that it is now important that a post office service is combined with a good retail offer to be successful. At the same time, fixed remuneration remains in those rural and remote locations where that approach is just not viable.

Post Office Ltd is not complacent and periodically reviews the rate of return on all services for postmasters to reflect the time and effort involved. For example, last year the Post Office increased remuneration on banking deposits twice to reflect the increased demand for services. I thank hon. Members for their positive comments about the increase announced last week to remuneration for postmasters for banking transactions; as hon. Members have outlined, that has doubled or in some cases tripled the fee payable to postmasters. Where possible, Post Office Ltd will continue to use the renewals of commercial contracts as opportunities to negotiate improved rates that can be shared with the postmaster.

I will answer a direct question put to me about why the Post Office is bringing forward the increase in charges only in October and why it is not happening before that time. The Post Office has taken the decision to implement the new banking framework payments to postmasters one quarter before the new negotiated banking framework comes into play. I understand that postmasters may be concerned, but the Post Office has acted to bring that in early and to enable the uplift to postmasters as soon as practically possible.

I want to pick up on one point raised by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), and give him some more information on cashpoints. He raised a concern about a post office having to pay the Post Office for that machine. Under its agreement with the Bank of Ireland, the Post Office pays post offices for the provision of the machines; they are remunerated for that. I would not be able to comment on any private agreement between an individual post office and another provider for the cashpoints. I would very much welcome further information after the debate, and I am happy to look into the issue for him.

Mr Sweeney: The additional concern is that the ATM footprint is subject to business rates, which is obviously a cost borne by the franchise holder. That is money over and above that received from Post Office Ltd, and it therefore represents a financial detriment to the franchise holder. The Minister needs to come up with a mechanism to offset that cost to the business, because otherwise it is unsustainable.

Kelly Tolhurst: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have been working to make business rates more equitable for small businesses, and we are looking at the impact of that. Post offices will have benefited from that work. He mentions costs that he has been made aware of; if he lets me know that particular constituency issue, I am more than happy to take that forward. As I have outlined, under the Bank of Ireland agreement with the Post Office, postmasters are remunerated for, rather than being expected to pay for the privilege of, delivering that service for our communities.

On the question of cashpoints, as we are faced with bank closures, which is a problem that we all very much agree on—they have deserted our high streets—it is for the post offices to pick up the slack in some cases. That is why this Government, with the Post Office, have been negotiating strongly on the new banking framework—to get a better deal for the postmasters who are delivering services that we all rely on in our high streets and communities.

The question of accessibility in the franchise branches has been raised. Franchising means that a post office presence can be maintained in town and city centres in a way that not only makes financial sense, but ensures that services are more accessible to customers, for example through the provision of extended hours and Sunday opening. Post Office Ltd is wholeheartedly committed to ensuring that the needs of the community and its customers are met in any relocation. That is why the Post Office consultation encourages the community to share its views on all matters, including issues related to accessibility under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Post Office Ltd and its franchise partners have stringent rules regarding access to post office branches, which meet all relevant legal requirements, to ensure that all customers, including those with disability or mobility issues, can access their branches. The Post Office also runs local consultations in order to engage local communities, so that they help to shape its plans. The Post Office does not seek a mandate for the franchising, but consults on practical aspects of a proposed relocation, such as service provision and accessibility.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister mentions communication. Has she met the Communication Workers Union about post office closures? Will she arrange that?

Kelly Tolhurst: If I might correct the hon. Gentleman, they are not closures; they are franchises. I am concerned about the language used when we talk about the post office network. We are talking about a change in operation, not closures or a loss of service. I will happily meet the CWU on any issues it wants to raise. However, I have to be clear that these are not closures; they are franchises. I think that that sends a really strong message, because communities will think that they are losing all their post office services, when that is factually not the case.

I am aware that hon. Members have expressed concerns about this process. I have met many hon. Members to discuss issues that they have had with franchising in their constituency, and have raised those directly with Post Office Ltd. Citizens Advice reports that Post Office consultation is increasingly effective, with improvements agreed and reassurances provided in most cases. That demonstrates that the Post Office is listening to communities. Ultimately, decisions on franchising are commercial ones for the Post Office to take—within the parameters set by the Government to ensure that we protect our valued network.

On the partnership between WHSmith and Post Office Ltd, WHSmith sees post offices as a central hub in the community and takes the social responsibilities that come with that very seriously. As I have outlined, WHSmith has successfully operated post offices within its stores since 2006, and following the recent agreement, the number of post offices run in WHSmith stores will be greater than 200. This will support the long-term sustainability of post office branches and bring longer opening hours, so that customers are offered seven days of trading a week in convenient locations. Throughout this period, WH Smith has shown that it can successfully run post office branches across the country by delivering excellent standards of customer service, with trained staff promoting products and services in a modern retail environment.

Hon. Members have levied accusations about the fitness of WHSmith and its operation, but it is still very much a recognised brand on the high street, as is the Post Office. We need to accept that some consumers and customers are still very much lovers of the WHSmith brand. I have visited WHSmith branches in which there have been franchises, and the feedback from the community has been very good. I have seen at first hand how it can work. However, each store operates independently. Again, if there are issues with branches in any Member's constituency, we will always raise those directly with the Post Office.

The Post Office card account is a commercial matter for the Department for Work and Pensions and Post Office Ltd. However, it is no secret that the contract for the Post Office card account comes to an end on 30 November 2021. For claimants who are unable to open a mainstream account ahead of that date, DWP will implement an alternative payment service that allows users to obtain cash payments, wherever their location, before the end of the contract.

It is worth pointing out that that 99% of a bank's personal customers are able to withdraw cash, deposit cash and cheques and make balance enquiries at a post office counter. Post offices will therefore remain central to delivering cash to customers, including the elderly or the most vulnerable, regardless of the banking product that they chose or move to.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) rightly said that it would not be appropriate for us to talk about the legal proceedings at this time. However, I assure her that as the Minister responsible, I will endeavour to take any action required. I am absolutely committed to doing whatever is in my power to make sure that the Post Office retains its standing, and that the relationships it maintains are the best that they can possibly be.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister says that standards will be maintained. Franchises do not maintain the same standard of services as Crown post offices. That is the point I am trying to make.

Kelly Tolhurst: I respect the hon. Gentleman's position, but I disagree that moving to a franchise equals a loss of services and standards. I do not believe that, and I have not seen that, so I respectfully disagree. However, I absolutely take his point and understand his concerns.

Decisions on bank branch closures are a commercial matter for banks and are taken by the management team of each bank, without intervention from the Government. So that hon. Members can see exactly how well I understand the problem, I highlight that I represent Rochester and Strood, and Rochester no longer has a bank in what was the city. However, the Government recognise that branch closures can be disappointing for customers and believe that the impact on communities must be understood, considered and mitigated where possible. That is why we support the Post Office's banking framework agreement, which enables 99% of the UK's personal banking customers and 95% of the UK's small and medium-sized enterprise banking customers to carry out day-to-day banking in the post office network.

I reassure the House that all post offices across the network are of the utmost importance to the Government. We recognise their value and importance to communities, residents, business and tourism in rural and urban parts of the UK. We also recognise and respect our sub-postmasters and the people who work within franchises, who work so hard, as was outlined throughout the debate; some postmasters will go the extra mile. We respect them, and we are determined to work with our partners to make sure that we maintain the Post Office as a viable business proposition for any postmaster to continue with. We will continue to honour our manifesto commitments, so that post offices thrive and remain at the heart of our rural and urban communities.

I again thank hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I understand their frustrations, and I take their issues on board. In closing, I remind colleagues that, as I have said several times, I am always willing to talk to any MP regarding any constituency branch issue.

3.57 pm

Marion Fellows: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chamber and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Unfortunately, you missed the beginning of the debate, and I have to say that the Minister's summing-up did not bear a lot of resemblance to what was actually said throughout. However, I am delighted that she agrees with us that the post office network is a vital national asset. It was a commitment in the Tory manifesto of 2017 to safeguard the network, but the tales that we heard from across the Chamber today are strong evidence that the network is not being safeguarded.

However, I am also very pleased that the Minister has reiterated that managed decline is not her objective. It is no one's objective, but there is real concern and fear in our communities. Almost weekly now, we as Members of the House of Commons receive representations from postmasters about their absolute desire to work harder and to work well within their communities, but about how they cannot afford to do that at present. They are

[Marion Fellows]

making less money per hour than the national minimum wage. Some are handling huge sums of cash, and they cannot make a living—that must not be allowed.

I do not think it is right that the Minister should hide behind the commercial independence of Post Office Ltd. It is really important to everyone in this Chamber and in our communities that the post office network be sustainable and move forward. During my speech, I asked 15 questions of the Minister. I asked for reviews; I asked for various things. I have not heard a single answer to any of the questions that I asked, but for the sake of brevity, I shall pick up now on only two of my questions.

As the Minister mentioned, Citizens Advice will continue to track services provided by the post office network, but what will she actually do when it reports back and says that things are not working? I have not heard an answer to that.

On outreach post offices in rural communities, a matter raised by various Members, I ask the Minister this: what happens after 2021, when the payments to those post offices cease?

I am sorry: I cannot count, because I have one more issue to raise. Post offices were to be the front office of Government. I ask the Minister to speak about that to Ministers in other Departments, such as the Home Office. The contract for biometric services has not been renewed by the Home Office, and that is putting more post offices at risk.

Hon. Members from across the Chamber intervened on the Minister. I chose not to do so, but I really hope that she will take on board my questions and provide answers that I can share with the Members who were here today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the sustainability of the Post Office network.

4.1 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 25 April 2019

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE

Contingent Liability

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present to Parliament a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

It is the intention of the Government to respect the 2016 referendum result and leave the European Union with a deal as soon as possible. However, there is now a legal need to prepare for possible participation in the European parliamentary elections, although it remains the Government's intention for the UK to leave the European Union with a deal before 22 May, so that we do not need to participate in these elections.

It is normal practice for the Government to indemnify returning officers in this way to ensure their personal liabilities are covered. The Cabinet Office previously provided an indemnity in 2014 for the European parliamentary elections. The Cabinet Office also provided an indemnity for the 2015 and 2017 UK parliamentary general elections, the 2016 Police and Crime Commissioner elections, and the recall of MPs petitions. HM Treasury has approved the indemnity in principle.

Given the highly unusual circumstances, as I hope hon. Members will appreciate, it has not been possible for the indemnity to be laid in Parliament for 14 sitting days before coming into effect.

On this basis, I have today laid a minute setting out the Cabinet Office's proposal to indemnify returning officers for the European parliamentary elections on 23 May 2019 against uninsured claims that arise out of the conduct of their duties. We will also provide a certificate confirming that we will bear any employee liabilities of the returning officer which would otherwise be covered by insurance procured under the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969.

[HCWS1525]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

The UK and the EU have agreed an extension to Article 50, until 31 October 2019, which is legally binding in EU and international law. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full Member State, and continue to act in good faith.

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) in Luxembourg on 9 April 2019. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union's website at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2019/04/09/>

Multiannual Financial Framework 2021 - 2027

The presidency presented a progress report outlining the latest developments on negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) - related sectorial proposals. The presidency also highlighted that common understandings have been reached with the European Parliament (EP) on ten sectorial files. Cohesion and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) continued to be the central pillars of the next MFF. However, the Commission noted that the proposed cuts to Cohesion and CAP were unavoidable due to the loss of the UK's contribution.

The Cohesion fund aims to reduce economic and social disparities and to promote sustainable development. Ministers discussed how the Cohesion policy and CAP can best support EU priorities. Some member states criticised the proposed cuts and supported maintaining funding for transition regions (where GDP per capita falls between 75% and 90% of the EU average). Other member states advocated for a stronger link of funds to the EU's core business, such as tackling climate change, rule of law and migration. There was general agreement that cohesion funding should be predictable, whilst allowing for a level of flexibility to manage unexpected events.

Ministers agreed that the funding priorities should be modernisation of the agricultural industry and securing support for young farmers. Some member states proposed a set target for expenditure contributing to climate change goals, while incentivising farmers to meet the goals.

Conclusions on the Reflection Paper "Towards a sustainable Europe by 2030"

Ministers adopted conclusions on the EU's implementation of the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are targets in 17 priority areas agreed between the members of the UN in 2015, with the aim of making the world a more sustainable place to live. The Council agreed that the SDGs are a key aspect of the EU's Strategic Agenda 2019-2024, making clear reference to "leave no one behind".

The Council's conclusions recognised the importance of the SDGs for the EU, stated that the UN 2030 Agenda was an overarching priority for the EU and stressed that it was in the EU's interest to play a leading role in its implementation, recognising that delivery of this agenda is necessarily a shared responsibility between all stakeholders.

Values of the Union - Hungary / Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Commission provided an update on the most recent developments regarding EU values in Hungary. Ministers discussed values of the Union in relation to Hungary.

Rule of Law in Poland / Article 7(1) TEU Reasoned Proposal

The Commission provided an update on the rule of law cases in Poland before the European Court of Justice, and its most recent infringement notification against Poland's disciplinary procedures for ordinary judges. The presidency stated that the Council would return to the issue.

[HCWS1523]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prüm Access: Switzerland and Liechtenstein

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The Prüm framework lays down provisions stating that EU member states grant each other access to their automated DNA analysis files, automated fingerprint identification systems (AFIS), and vehicle registration data. The European Commission has proposed Council decisions that, if adopted, would extend participation in the key data-sharing elements of Prüm to Switzerland and Liechtenstein as third countries.

The UK is fully supportive of data sharing to assist the investigation, prosecution and prevention of serious crime and terrorism. It is the Government's position that data-sharing regimes between countries, with appropriate safeguards, enhance the safety and wellbeing of citizens of and visitors to those countries. The UK has opted in to the Prüm decisions and remains committed to fully implementing Prüm in the UK.

The UK is also fully supportive of extending the law enforcement access to Prüm to Switzerland and Liechtenstein. The UK has no current biometrics data-sharing agreements in place with Switzerland or Liechtenstein. These states are close partners and enabling further data sharing with them will enhance both their security and ours.

The Government have therefore decided to opt in to the EU Council decisions authorising the signing and conclusion of agreements between the EU and Switzerland, and the EU and Liechtenstein, to enable their access as third countries to Prüm, stepping up cross-border co-operation, particularly in combating terrorism and cross-border crime.

The UK 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. The UK is committed to fully implementing Prüm and continuing the international exchange of biometric data with the EU as part of this future security partnership.

[HCWS1524]

Petition

Thursday 25 April 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police force funding

The petition of the residents and business owners of Southampton in Hampshire,

Declares that the Police Force is unable to secure sufficient funds from Central Government in order to adequately protect the people of this country from the frightening increase in crime. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the Police have the resources they need to adequately protect the people of this country.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Dr Whitehead, Official Report, 5 March 2019; Vol 655, col 929.*]

[P002433]

Observations from the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd):

The Government have reviewed the changing and increasingly complex demands on the police and have responded by providing total funding of around £14 billion for 2019-20 to policing . This represents an increase of over £970 million compared to 2018/19, including council tax precept. This police settlement will enable police forces, including Hampshire constabulary, to meet the financial pressures they face next year, while continuing to recruit and fill capability gaps, such as the shortage of detectives.

The Hampshire police and crime commissioner will be able to increase his budget to £339 million in 2019/20, an increase of £25 million compared to 2018/19. I welcome his announcement that he will use this funding increase to recruit an additional 200 police officers and 65 police staff investigators.

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 25 April 2019

TRANSPORT

East Midlands Rail Franchise

The following is an extract from the response by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), to an urgent question on Thursday 11 April 2019.

Andrew Jones: Stagecoach is an experienced bidder and fully aware of the franchise competition rules, so it is regrettable that it submitted a non-compliant bid that breached the established rules. In doing so, Stagecoach

is responsible for its own disqualification. Bidders were invited to bid on the basis of a pension deficit recovery mechanism. They knew that at the very start of the process.

[Official Report, 11 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 460.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts).

The correct response should have been:

Andrew Jones: Stagecoach is an experienced bidder and fully aware of the franchise competition rules, so it is regrettable that it submitted a non-compliant bid that breached the established rules. In doing so, Stagecoach is responsible for its own disqualification. Bidders were invited to bid on the basis of a pension deficit recovery mechanism. They knew that **was part** of the process.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 25 April 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
INTERNATIONAL TRADE	855	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	866
EU Customs Union	859	Domestic Abuse: Medical Training.....	870
Free Trade Agreements: NHS/Public Services.....	855	Gender Pay Gap	873
Free Trade Agreements: Regions and Devolved		Topical Questions	874
Administrations	858	Universal Credit: Effect on Women.....	874
GREAT Campaign	862	Universal Credit: Joint Claimants	866
Intellectual Property Rights	861	Women Entrepreneurs	871
Service Businesses: Overseas Markets	856	Women's Life Expectancy	868
Topical Questions	862	Workplace Harassment	872

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 25 April 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF		HOME DEPARTMENT	30WS
LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE	29WS	Prüm Access: Switzerland and Liechtenstein	30WS
Contingent Liability	29WS		
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION	29WS		
General Affairs Council	29WS		

PETITION

Thursday 25 April 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
HOME DEPARTMENT	7P		
Police force funding.....	7P		

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 25 April 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	7MC
East Midlands Rail Franchise	7MC

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CONTENTS

Thursday 25 April 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 855] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for International Trade
Minister for Women and Equalities

UK Telecoms: Huawei [Col. 881]

Answer to urgent question—(Jeremy Wright)

Electoral Registration: EU Citizens [Col. 893]

Answer to urgent question—(Brandon Lewis)

Government Mandate for the NHS [Col. 903]

Answer to urgent question—(Stephen Hammond)

Business of the House [Col. 909]

Statement—(Andrea Leadsom)

Carbon Capture Usage and Storage [Col. 926]

Select Committee Statement—(Anna Turley)

National Insurance Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) [Col. 931]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) [Col. 931]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Backbench Business

School Funding [Col. 932]

Motion—(Mrs Main)—agreed to

Children and Young People: Restrictive Intervention [Col. 974]

Motion—(Norman Lamb)—agreed to

Travellers in Mole Valley [Col. 992]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Post Office Network [Col. 361WH]

General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 29WS]

Petition [Col. 7P]

Observations

Ministerial Correction [Col. 7MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
