

Monday
29 April 2019

Volume 659
No. 292



HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 29 April 2019

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JUNE 2017)

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS—The Rt. Hon Jeremy Hunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WALES—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP
MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Brandon Lewis, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Rt Hon. Claire Perry, MP (Minister for Energy and Clean Growth)
Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Kelly Tolhurst, MP
Andrew Stephenson, MP
The Rt Hon. Lord Henley

Cabinet Office—

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. David Lidington, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Oliver Dowden, MP
Chloe Smith, MP
Kevin Foster, MP §

Defence—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §
The Rt Hon. Mark Lancaster, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, MP
Stuart Andrew, MP

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Margot James, MP (Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Ashton of Hyde
Michael Ellis, MP
Mims Davies, MP

Education—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Nick Gibb, MP (Minister for School Standards)

The Rt Hon. Anne Milton, MP (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills)

Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Agnew of Oulton

Nadhim Zahawi, MP

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Michael Gove, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Robert Goodwill, MP (Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Thérèse Coffey, MP

Lord Gardiner of Kimble

David Rutley, MP §

Exiting the European Union —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Callanan

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Robin Walker, MP

James Cleverly, MP

Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

Foreign and Commonwealth Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Hunt, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Duncan, MP (Minister for Europe and the Americas)

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for the Commonwealth and the UN)

The Rt Hon. Mark Field, MP (Minister for Asia and the Pacific)

Harriett Baldwin, MP (Minister for Africa) §

Health and Social Care—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Stephen Hammond, MP (Minister for Health)

Caroline Dinenage, MP (Minister for Care)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Seema Kennedy, MP

Jackie Doyle-Price, MP

Baroness Blackwood of North Oxford

Home Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Sajid Javid, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP (Minister for Immigration)

The Rt Hon. Ben Wallace, MP (Minister for Security and Economic Crime)

The Rt Hon. Nick Hurd, MP (Minister for Policing and the Fire Service and Minister for London)

Baroness Williams of Trafford (Minister for Countering Extremism and Minister for Equalities) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Victoria Atkins, MP §

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Housing)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Jake Berry, MP

Heather Wheeler, MP

Rishi Sunak, MP

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

International Development—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Harriett Baldwin, MP §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Sugg, CBE §

Victoria Atkins, MP §

Baroness Williams of Trafford §

International Trade—

SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

George Hollingbery, MP (Minister for Trade Policy)
Baroness Fairhead (Minister for Trade and Export Promotion)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Graham Stuart, MP

Justice—

LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Rory Stewart, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lucy Frazer, QC, MP
Edward Argar, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Law Officers—

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Cox, QC, MP

SOLICITOR GENERAL—Robert Buckland, QC, MP

ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Leader of the House of Commons—

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL—The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom, MP

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—John Penrose, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Scotland Office —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Mundell, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Lord Duncan of Springbank §

Transport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Jesse Norman, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Nusrat Ghani, MP §
Andrew Jones, MP
Baroness Vere of Norbiton §

Treasury—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY AND MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE—The Rt Hon. Theresa May, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Philip Hammond, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Elizabeth Truss, MP

FINANCIAL SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Mel Stride, MP

EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Robert Jenrick, MP

ECONOMIC SECRETARY—John Glen, MP

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Julian Smith, MP

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

Mike Freer, MP
Paul Maynard, MP
Alister Jack, MP
Rebecca Harris, MP
David Rutley, MP §
Jeremy Quin, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

Nusrat Ghani, MP §
Iain Stewart, MP
Jo Churchill, MP
Amanda Milling, MP
Michelle Donelan, MP
Matt Warman, MP
Wendy Morton, MP
Kevin Foster, MP §

UK Export Finance—

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
 MINISTER FOR TRADE AND EXPORT PROMOTION—Baroness Fairhead

Wales Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

Kevin Foster, MP §

Work and Pensions

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Alok Sharma, MP (Minister for Employment)

Justin Tomlinson, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Guy Opperman, MP

Baroness Buscombe

Will Quince, MP

Office of the Leader of the House of Lords

LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §

Her Majesty's Household—

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Earl Peel GCVO, DL

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Dalhousie

MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord Vestey KCVO

TREASURER—Christopher Pincher, MP

COMPTROLLER—Mark Spencer, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Craig Whittaker, MP

CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Taylor of Holbeach CBE

CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown

BARONesses IN WAITING—Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Baroness Sugg CBE §, Baroness Goldie DL, Baroness Barran MBE, Baroness Stedman-Scott DL, Baroness Manzoor CBE

LORDS IN WAITING—Viscount Younger of Leckie, The Rt Hon. Lord Young of Cookham CH

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt. Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Bridget Phillipson, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY—Mr Charles Walker, MP

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP

CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. John Bercow, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Eleanor Laing, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS

Sir David Amess, Ian Austin, Mr Adrian Bailey, Sir Henry Bellingham, Mr Clive Betts, Mr Peter Bone, Sir Graham Brady, Ms Karen Buck, Sir Christopher Chope, Sir David Crausby, Geraint Davies, Philip Davies, Ms Nadine Dorries, Mr Nigel Evans, Sir Roger Gale, Mike Gapes, The Rt Hon. Dame Cheryl Gillan, James Gray, The Rt Hon. David Hanson, Mr Philip Hollobone, Stewart Hosie, The Rt Hon. Mr George Howarth, Sir Edward Leigh, Mrs Anne Main, Steve McCabe, Siobhain McDonagh, Mrs Madeleine Moon, Albert Owen, Ian Paisley, Mark Pritchard, Mr Laurence Robertson, Andrew Rosindell, The Rt Hon. Joan Ryan, Mr Virendra Sharma, Mr Gary Streeter, Graham Stringer, Mr Charles Walker, Phil Wilson

SECRETARY—Colin Lee

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The Rt Hon. The Speaker (Chairman), Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Stewart Hosie, MP, The Rt Hon. Andrea Leadsom, MP (Leader of the House), Dr Rima Makarem (External Member), Jane McCall (External Member), Valerie Vaz, MP, The Rt Hon. Dame Rosie Winterton, MP

SECRETARY OF THE COMMISSION—Marianne Cwynarski

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Robert Cope

ADMINISTRATION ESTIMATE AUDIT AND RISK ASSURANCE COMMITTEE AND MEMBERS ESTIMATE AUDIT COMMITTEE

Dr Rima Makarem (Chair), Sir Paul Beresford, MP, Mr Clive Betts, MP, The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP, Jane McCall, Bob Scruton

SECRETARY—John-Paul Flaherty

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD

Ian Ailles (Director General of the House of Commons), Carlos Bamford (Managing Director, In-House Services), Myfanwy Barrett (Managing Director, Corporate Services and Finance Director), Dr John Benger (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Service), Sarah Davies (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Committees), David Hemming (Managing Director, Strategic Estates), Eric Hepburn (Director of Security for Parliament), Tracey Jessup (Director of the Parliamentary Digital Service), Dr Edge Watchorn (Managing Director, Participation), Penny Young (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information)

SECRETARY OF THE BOARD—Rhiannon Hollis

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY—Peter Barratt

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Kathryn Stone

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 13 JUNE 2017]

SIXTY-EIGHTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 659

THIRTY-FOURTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 29 April 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

School Exclusions: Timpson Review

2. **Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): What progress has been made on the Timpson review of school exclusions.

[910556]

5. **James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): What progress has been made on the Timpson review of school exclusions.

[910559]

12. **Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What progress has been made on the Timpson review of school exclusions.

[910566]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): I am very grateful to Edward Timpson for the thorough work he has been leading on exclusions. The review has gathered substantial evidence and will report shortly, and I will then respond.

Sarah Jones: The all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which I chair, found through an extensive freedom of information request that a third of local authorities have no space left in their pupil referral units. We know that excluded children who are not

offered a full-time place at a pupil referral unit are at an increased risk of being involved in crime. We were told that the Timpson review was finalised last year. We are still waiting for a publication date to be confirmed. When will the Secretary of State confirm that date, and when will the Government act?

Damian Hinds: I commend the hon. Lady for the work that she and her colleagues do on the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, which is a terrible scourge for us all to grapple with. I am not in a position to give her a date for publication of the Timpson review. It will be soon, but we have to be careful not to draw a simple causal link between exclusions and knife crime.

James Frith: According to the most recent figures collected by the Education Policy Institute, in one year nearly 55,000 children have disappeared from school rolls without explanation. The Secretary of State cannot tell us why, nor can he for those excluded officially, because his Department collects no further information on them. While we wait for Timpson to report, will the Secretary of State commit to my call—one that is supported by Ofsted, the National Education Union and many people across education—to scrap the “other” category as a reason for exclusion, which now represents 20% of exclusions in our schools on his watch?

Damian Hinds: To continue the theme of simple links that should not be drawn, it would be wrong to associate that figure of 55,000 with any one category. There are many reasons why children may be taken out of school—for example, emigration. We are concerned, of course, about exclusions. That is why I invited Edward Timpson to carry out this review. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt what he has to say, but we will report back soon.

Ellie Reeves: As well as having concerns about delays to the review, I am concerned about other forms of exclusion that may fall out of scope. I am aware in my constituency of the use of isolation units in schools, where students are removed from lessons and placed in

single booths to work on their own, often for several days at a time, with no therapeutic intervention, as a form of punishment for poor behaviour. Often that results in the student no longer going to school. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss ending the draconian use of isolation units?

Damian Hinds: I know that there was a good debate on related matters recently in the House. We support headteachers and schools in making decisions on proportionate use of behaviour management. It is important that that is proportionate, but headteachers and schools are generally in the best position to make those judgments. We also issue guidance from the centre, which we keep under review.

22. [910577] **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): What message does the Secretary of State have for those who volunteer to exclude themselves from school to take part in climate change protests, given that they seem disproportionately likely to attend schools that are fond of organising long-haul flights across the world to take part in ski trips, social visits and even a netball match in Barbados in one case?

Damian Hinds: I am delighted when children and young people take an active interest in these incredibly important issues, and on a number of environmental topics children and young people have very much taken the lead, but my message to them is: on a Friday afternoon, the best place for you to be is in school. That is where you can learn to be a climate scientist or an engineer and solve these problems in the future. Being absent from school tends to disrupt learning for others and causes an additional workload for your teachers.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Exclusion should only be used as a last resort, but it is worth remembering the disruption that the child can cause to everybody else's education in a class. Can my right hon. Friend tell me how the number of exclusions is going as a trend—for instance, was it higher 10 years ago?

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. He is right that permanent exclusion should be a last resort, and in my experience of headteachers, it is: it is a decision that they come to after a great deal of soul searching. He is also right that as well as the effect on the individual child, we have to think about the effect on the other 27 children in the class and, indeed, the staff in the school. There has been an upward trend in the number of exclusions in the past few years, but it has not reached the highs we saw under previous Labour Governments.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree with me that when permanent exclusions do happen, it should not be the end of something, but the start of something new and positive to get that child's education back on track? Will he look at whether powers are needed by the regional schools commissioners to enable them to work with local education authorities to ensure excluded children are not just left wandering the streets?

Damian Hinds: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend that exclusion must be the start of something new and positive, as well as the end of something, and

that is why the quality of alternative provision is so important. I pay tribute to the brilliant staff and leaders who work in our alternative provision settings, 84% of which are rated good or outstanding. However, we know there is always more that can be done, and that is why we have our innovation fund and other initiatives.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Secretary of State surely knows that he lost nearly 9,500 pupils on his watch last year. They went off roll, and we had no idea where they went. Following on from the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith), one in 12 pupils who began secondary school in 2012 and finished in 2017 were removed from school rolls. Given the scale of the problem, will the Secretary of State not tell us when the Timpson review will be published and commit to Labour's pledge that schools should retain responsibility for the results of the pupils they exclude?

Damian Hinds: I have not ruled that out, as the hon. Gentleman will know. I am sure he will join me in welcoming the consultation we have put out on children not in school and on maintaining a register of children not in school, including the duty to make sure that extra help is provided for home educating parents, where they seek it. There have always been absences from school, as he will know. We have made great progress over the years on absence and persistent absence from school, but we need to make sure that more is done.

Creative Projects: Early Years Experience

3. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help ensure that creative and practical projects are part of the early years experience in schools. [910557]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Creative and practical subjects form a key part of the early years foundation stage statutory framework, which is mandatory for all early years providers, including of course schools.

Mr Sheerman: I have some experience in this area, as the former Chair of the Select Committee on Education. Is the Minister not aware that, over several years, we have seen how the push to study for early years testing has really pushed the practical and the creative out of the classroom, and could we bring it back? Will the Minister talk to Tristram Hunt, who is the director of the Victoria & Albert Museum, which has learning hubs, practical hubs and making hubs, and learn from his experience?

Nadhim Zahawi: I would certainly talk to Tristram Hunt. Expressive arts and design is one of the seven areas of learning set out in the early years foundation stage statutory framework, and it involves exploring and using media and materials, and being imaginative, including through design and technology, art, music, dance, role play and stories.

23. [910578] **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with me that art, drama and music are crucial to a balanced and broad education and should therefore be encouraged in all our schools?

Nadhim Zahawi: I do, indeed, agree with my right hon. Friend. Between 2016 and 2020, we are spending almost £500 million on a range of music and creative arts programmes.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), does the Minister not accept that the emphasis on testing only English and maths—not just in primary school, but throughout—is having a detrimental effect on experiential learning, project learning and creating people with a lust for learning, not those who can just regurgitate facts?

Nadhim Zahawi: No teacher or school leader would disagree about the lust for learning and making learning fun, but testing is the building block that allows us to make the investment and have the focus necessary to produce the extraordinary results that we are producing for children and families up and down the country.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the early years stage should include a broad range of learning goals, including communication, physical development and self-confidence, as well as of course a thirst for knowledge?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly do. Our proposals retain 17 early learning goals to reflect the breadth of the current early years foundation stage approach as well.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Good-quality music tuition builds our young people's creativity, skills and mental wellbeing. Accessing it is a challenge in poorer communities such as my own. What assessment have Ministers made of an art pupil premium to level this imbalance?

Nadhim Zahawi: Art, music and design are compulsory in all maintained schools from age five to age 14. All schools, including academies, are required to provide a broad and balanced curriculum.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Will my hon. Friend ensure that digital and IT skills play a role in the early years curriculum to ensure that our young people encounter early on the technologies that they will need to become familiar with as they progress through school?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly agree; I know that my hon. Friend is a passionate advocate of IT literacy.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), for visiting Space Studio West London in my constituency to see young people making robots and getting involved in other engineering projects such as sustainable energy. My mobile phone was charged wirelessly this morning by an invention of theirs.

Does the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), agree that employability comes from having practical learning? Will he join me in trying to make sure that creativity is encouraged in all our schools? Will he support my arts and makers fair, which will showcase work by young people across Hounslow?

Nadhim Zahawi: I certainly agree with all that. I will certainly support the fair that the hon. Lady plans in her area, and I am sure that my colleagues would join me in visiting it.

Mr Speaker: That sounds very exciting, I must say. I have been to the hon. Lady's constituency a number of times, but I have merely spoken. The notion that I might create a robot has never been put to me—thankfully.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister may be aware of the recent "Sounds of Intent" report, which showed that targeted music lessons for under-fives helps close the gap, particularly in deprived areas and for children with complex needs. Can the Minister tell us whether he believes that every child should have access to music while at nursery? If so, what audit is he doing on quality? He may agree that putting a CD on at Christmas is very different from having a professional come in on a weekly basis. If he believes that quality is important, what is he doing to ensure that music has a greater role in the early years foundation stage?

Nadhim Zahawi: We plan to spend around £3.5 billion on early education entitlements this year alone, and that targets the most disadvantaged in society. The hon. Lady rightly mentions music, which is very much part of the creative portfolio that children under five should be enjoying. Part of our funding, of course, is for making sure that we deliver all that and more in our fantastic early years provision.

Immigration Legislation: Tertiary Education

4. **Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** What assessment he has made of the potential effect of proposed immigration legislation on tertiary education. [910558]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): My visit to Space Studio West London this morning was excellent; a robot even transported my ministerial pack across the room. I was incredibly impressed.

On the immigration White Paper, I should say that the Government are undertaking a period of extensive engagement on the future of our immigration system. It will consider the views of business, academic institutions and employers. That will ensure that the future immigration system works for the whole UK, including students in tertiary education.

Martyn Day: EU nationals are an integral part of academic institutions in Scotland, accounting for 20% of total staff and playing a crucial role in the research and teaching capacities of our colleges and universities. The £30,000 salary threshold is a critical threat to that. Does the Secretary of State personally support that policy, or will he finally support scrapping it?

Chris Skidmore: As the Minister responsible in a different Department for science, research and innovation, I recognise the challenges presented by the £30,000 cap recommended by the Migration Advisory Committee. I understand that there is a period of consultation on this cap at the moment. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to

make his representations known to the Home Office. I have also been working with the high-level group on exiting the European Union on this issue.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The SQA—Scottish Qualifications Authority—exams started in Scotland last week and today pupils are sitting exams in German, politics, biology and Gaelic. I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing them the very best of success. Gur math a thèid leibh!

The inclusion of international students in net migration figures continues to cause deep concerns across higher education, and it now seems that EU nationals will be subject to the same harsh regime. Can the Minister confirm that from 2021 EU nationals will pay annual fees of up to £25,000 to attend university in England?

Chris Skidmore: There will be an urgent question on this issue later, but it is important to reflect on the fact that the Government have already committed for the 2019-20 academic year that there will be home fee status for EU students for the 2020-21 academic year. We will be making an announcement on that very shortly. It is also important to recognise that the number of EU students has risen by 3.8% since 2017. The Government want to ensure we do our best to attract the best and the brightest internationally, which is why we recently published our international education strategy. I want to ensure we do not just attract global talent from the EU. The key point here is to ensure we do not discriminate against EU students versus international students, but that we have a system that works for all students across the globe.

Carol Monaghan: The UK's hostile immigration environment seems to know no bounds. EU nationals will now experience the same harsh conditions as other international students. It seems that the Government are happy to ignore advice from universities, business and civic society in their attempt to curb international student numbers. What impact assessment has been made of potentially losing high-calibre EU students who may well decide to study in a more welcoming country?

Chris Skidmore: On the urgent question, I will not comment on specific leaks when it comes to matters of policy yet to be decided, but we have to look at this issue in the international context. The number of non-EU students is also up, by 4.9%, which is testament to the fact that we have world-leading universities. Four out of the top 10 universities are in the UK, including Edinburgh in Scotland. We need to plan to ensure we have a sustainable system that backs talent coming to this country, both in terms of research and science. We will also be announcing an international research innovation strategy. We want to ensure that students come here, but we need to make sure it is affordable for the British taxpayer.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister talks about numbers, but he will know that, according to the OECD, the UK market share has fallen from 12% in 2010 to 8% in 2016. That is equivalent to £9 billion in lost export earnings. He will also know that there is strong cross-party support for an amendment to the immigration Bill, which I have tabled with the hon.

Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), to reverse the policies that have led to that decline. Will he agree to meet us, so that together we can persuade his Government colleagues of the need to back those changes?

Chris Skidmore: I am always happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. I am sure he remembers that when I was a Cabinet Office I happily worked with him on an amendment he tabled to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 regarding student registration. However, since 2017, the figures show a rise in EU and non-EU students. He mentions market share. He is absolutely right that we want to do more and that we need to do more. That is why we published our international education strategy, which has the ambition not just of raising the complete value of international education from £30 billion to £35 billion by 2030, but of putting in the figure of 600,000 students. It is not just about having a system that works around visas, but the whole student experience and ensuring the UK is the best place to study globally.

Leaving the EU: Tertiary Education

6. **Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on tertiary education of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement. [910560]

8. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on tertiary education of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement. [910562]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government remain focused on securing a deal that will ensure an orderly exit from the EU. We are considering all aspects of how exiting the EU might affect education, including the delivery of the Government guarantee, attracting international students and staff, and access to student finance.

Dr Whitford: In contrast to Scotland, the Secretary of State proposes to remove home fee status from EU students after Brexit. This has created such concern that the Norwegian higher education Minister is advising students to avoid the UK. Is the Secretary of State proud that his plans are causing European students to avoid our universities?

Chris Skidmore: I recently met the Norwegian Minister the hon. Lady mentions, Iselin Nybø, to reassure her of the UK Government's commitment to student programmes such as Erasmus and scientific programmes such as Horizon 2020. What I am not happy with is Members talking down our higher education system when the Government want to ensure that we bring more students here. We are looking at how to do that as part of our education strategy.

John Mc Nally: In the event of a no-deal Brexit, the Government have proposed a temporary leave that will apply to EU citizens for 36 months, allowing EU students to complete their third-level degrees here in England. However, the majority of Scottish degree courses last for 48 months, and thus EU students will face the threat of being forced to leave before finishing their education.

Will the Minister advise on what steps he has taken to address and right this policy, which will harm Scottish universities?

Chris Skidmore: I recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman makes and the potential impact on Scottish universities, as does the Home Secretary, whose officials have been working closely with mine on this. The Government are now considering how best to ensure that students on four-year courses are easily able to move into the student system once their European temporary leave to remain expires. If European economic area or Swiss citizens wish to stay in the UK for longer than 36 months, they will need to apply and qualify for an immigration status under the main study routes of the UK's new skills-based immigration system. Alternatively, they will be able to apply, under tier 4 of the points-based system, for a student visa to cover the full length of their course.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Our higher education institutions—including the Open University, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this month—are world class, but sadly, despite what the Minister says, the Government are letting those universities down. They are not giving clarity at the moment over access to Erasmus+, they are not guaranteeing continued access to Horizon Europe funding and there are fears over research grant collaboration with EU partners.

Now there are reports that the Government are preparing to charge EU students—[*Interruption*] Stop chuntering!—who currently pay UK fees, a hugely increased international rate, and to scrap their support when we leave the EU, with or without a deal. The Minister is wrong: statistics from the Russell Group show that EU student numbers are 3% down, and EU postgraduate numbers are 9% down for 2018-19. The Education Secretary is said to be pushing this forward. Does the universities Minister agree with it, and is it Government policy?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman talks about uncertainty, but it is uncertainty that he himself has created, as one of the Members who has not voted for a deal, which would have provided certainty on student mobility and student finance. The deal, if passed, will allow us to begin work on a future relationship that ensures that we can work together, with our universities sector and with our European partners. Although we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving our European neighbours behind. We want to continue those close partnerships, which is why I have been in Brussels attending the European Competitiveness Council—I hope to do so again on 28 May—to ensure that we can associate into Horizon Europe. I want to continue to work on the possibilities for student exchanges. It is important that we maintain our university system not just as a European one but as an international one as well.

Mr Speaker: Brevity personified—Sir Nicholas Soames.

Language Teaching

7. **Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to increase language teaching in schools. [910561]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It was Labour's decision in 2004 to make languages at key stage 4 non-compulsory that led to the dramatic drop in the numbers taking GCSE foreign languages. Thanks to our introduction of the EBacc, the percentage of pupils in state-funded schools taking a language GCSE has increased, from 40% in 2010 to 46% now. Our target is 75% studying a foreign language GCSE by 2022 and 90% by 2025.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Given that catastrophic mistake by the Labour party, I commend my right hon. Friend and his colleagues for the proportion of pupils taking a language GCSE increasing from 40% to 47% since 2010. Does he agree that, given the—so far, unicorn—desire to develop a really global Britain project, it will become more and more important that our students are properly equipped for a fully global world, in which Britain will have to make a new way for itself?

Nick Gibb: I agree with my right hon. Friend completely. As we enter a new global economy, we want to be able to trade with our European partners and need to speak European languages, as well as languages throughout the world, which is why we believe in the EBacc. I wish the Labour party would support our ambition to have 75% of students taking the EBacc combination of GCSEs by 2022.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The provision of languages post-16 has shrunk since 2010. This is largely due—or partly due at least—to the continually growing 16-to-18 funding gap on the Government's watch. Is it not time to raise the rates so that, among other things, languages can prosper again post-16?

Nick Gibb: Actually, that is not the reason. The numbers taking A-level maths and further maths are at all-time highs. Languages have suffered because of the decision in 2004 on GCSEs. It is difficult for someone to take an A-level in a language if they have not studied it at GCSE.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Speaking a language greatly increases one's employability. According to *Business Insider*, the No. 1 language for getting a good job is German—going by the number of job ads and the quality and pay of the jobs—yet only 3,000 pupils sat German A-level last year. The exam could be held in Westminster Hall so few are the pupils. I appreciate that the Government have an excellent record on GCSEs. Can we do more to encourage language learning at A-level?

Nick Gibb: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Germany is the fourth largest economy and not far away—a few hundred miles—from this country, and we need more young people studying German GCSE, which is why we have the target of having 75% taking a modern language by 2022.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): To teach more foreign languages in schools we need to recruit and retain the very best teachers. What is the Minister doing to help us retain the very best modern languages teachers, who are feeling the pressure under increased workloads and increased stress?

Nick Gibb: That is why we have introduced a recruitment and retention strategy and why we have £26,000 tax-free bursaries and £28,000 tax-free scholarships for the best foreign language graduates coming into teaching. Teaching is a very worthwhile profession. I hope the hon. Gentleman will talk it up, as we do on the Conservative Benches.

School Places: Essex

9. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the adequate provision of school places in Essex and other areas of high growth. [910563]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): One of the first decisions the Government took on coming to office in 2010 was to double the capital expenditure on creating new school places, after the previous Labour Government cut 100,000 school places. Since 2010, some 921,000 new school places have been created, including 450 new free schools. More than £12 billion has been committed since 2011 to delivering those new schools and new school places.

Vicky Ford: My constituency is growing very fast and we need more school places. We have a new all-through school opening, but many of the other schools are expanding their places and then struggling because the funding comes with a lag. Come the spending review, will my right hon. Friend and the Education team support a campaign for fairer funding for schools in areas of very high growth?

Nick Gibb: The national funding formula allocates £287 million nationally in growth funding and local authorities also have the ability to top-slice their wider schools block funding if necessary to supplement growth funding. In 2018-19, Essex has been allocated £6.8 million in growth funding through the national funding formula growth factor, but we will, as my hon. Friend requests, make a strong case at the spending review for the right education funding for all areas.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): From some of the answers from Ministers today, anyone would think they had not been in government for nearly a decade.

School places are really important for parents, but often at this time of the year many of them find it is not they who choose the school their sons and daughters will go to but the school that chooses which pupils to accept. Can I remind Ministers of the pledges they made before the last general election? Parents in Essex and across the country were promised a review of school admissions in the Conservative party manifesto. Will the Minister keep to that promise?

Nick Gibb: What I will tell the hon. Lady is that last year—which is the latest for which we have figures—97.7% of families achieved one of their top three primary school choices, 91% achieved their first choice of primary school, and 93.8% achieved one of their top three choices of secondary school. In 2010, when we came to office, just 66% of pupils attended a good or outstanding school; today the figure is 86%.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): When Aspire alternative provision Academy in Harlow was taken over by the TBAP Multi-Academy Trust in 2017, it had a healthy balance and a strong business plan. Since then, it has been revealed on the BBC's "Panorama" programme that TBAP had been in serious debt, and its public accounts were found to be inaccurate. Aspire has been dragged down with it. Does the Minister agree that it is absolutely necessary for Ofsted to inspect multi-academy trusts to prevent that situation from occurring again? How will he support Aspire, whose headteacher is here today, and which wants to be brokered to another MAT?

Nick Gibb: As my right hon. Friend will know, we issued a financial notice to improve to the TBAP trust in August 2018, long before the "Panorama" programme was broadcast, because we were concerned about poor financial management and controls. That notice will remain in place until we are satisfied that the trust has taken effective action to address our concerns. We always act swiftly in such circumstances, and our primary concern has been to preserve the education of children and limit the impact on the taxpayer.

Tom Purslove (Corby) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I congratulate the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Purslove) on running in the marathon yesterday, while also expressing some surprise that he is nevertheless still leaping to his feet with notable alacrity.

Tom Purslove: Thank you, Mr Speaker. That is very kind. All the pain is worth it for two great causes.

Corby is the fastest growing town in the country, and it is essential for school places to keep up with that housing growth. What reassurance can the Minister give parents in my constituency that both the policy and the resources are in place to achieve exactly that?

Nick Gibb: Let me add my congratulations to my hon. Friend on his achievement in the London marathon. He will be pleased to know that in 2019-20 we have introduced a new formulaic approach to the allocation of growth funding to local authorities in the NFF. It is a fairer system, because it is based not just on what the authorities spent in the past but on the actual growth in the number of pupils. We will, of course, always keep this issue under review.

Education Funding: England

10. **Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of education funding in England. [910564]

14. **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of education funding in England. [910569]

24. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of education funding in England. [910579]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): While this country is a relatively high spender on state education by comparison with other similar countries,

we recognise that finances remain challenging, and we will continue to listen to professionals in the run-up to the spending review.

Phil Wilson: Like many other schools in my constituency, Fishburn Primary School is facing severe funding difficulties, to the extent that parents are holding a fundraising event to raise money for essentials. Given that a real-terms increase in funds is not coming from his Department, would the Secretary of State care to contribute a raffle prize to help to raise the money that will ensure that local children continue to receive the education that they deserve?

Damian Hinds: It is, of course, exceptionally important for schools to be properly resourced. In the Darlington local authority area, where the typical primary class size is 27, the average funding is £104,000, while in the Durham local authority area—which the hon. Gentleman mentioned—where the class size is slightly smaller at 25, the funding is a shade higher at £105,000. Of course it is right that, through the national funding formula, we ensure that schools are properly resourced for the education that they will need to deliver.

Rushanara Ali: Since 2015 schools in Tower Hamlets have lost out on some £56 million—of which £7.7 million is for children with special needs—despite having the highest child poverty rate in the country. When will the Secretary of State stand up to the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, and seek the additional funding that is so much needed for our children around the country?

Damian Hinds: As my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards said earlier, we will of course put forward a strong case for education, on which so much else depends in both our society and our economy. The hon. Lady mentioned her constituency. That is an area of relatively high school funding per pupil, and specifically on high needs. I recognise the additional pressures on the high-needs budget, but £1.4 million of the additional money that we were able to secure for high needs will go to her constituents over two years.

Grahame Morris: Of the 33 schools in the Easington constituency, 28 have had their funding cut between 2015 and 2019, three of them by more than £600,000, including my former primary school, now called Ribbon Primary School. Are we to take it that the Government's plan is to transfer resources from hard-pressed areas in the north-east to more affluent areas in the south and south-east?

Damian Hinds: Funding has been allocated on a per-pupil basis for a large number of years now, including through the period 1997 to 2010, so a decrease in pupil numbers has an effect on funding, but through the national funding formula over two years we are allocating at least a 1% increase in respect of every child in the country, and for historically underfunded areas, up to 6%.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Amounts per pupil are being top-sliced to meet a deficit in the high-needs block, so the amount actually going into the school accounts per pupil is not nearly as impressive, is it?

Damian Hinds: There is pressure on high-needs budgets. Actually, the high-needs budget has gone up from £5 billion to £6 billion over the last few years, but there are still those pressures, as my right hon. Friend rightly says. That is why it was so important to secure the additional £250 million that we announced at the end of last year.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I obviously welcome the fact that 15,200 children are now in good and outstanding schools in Somerset, as compared to 2010, but—urgently—teachers are coming to me increasingly about the funding pressures they are under, because they have more and more on their shoulders. I have just had seven schools in the Tone Valley Partnership and a raft of schools with the Redstart Trust coming to me to highlight their funding pressures, so please will the Secretary of State meet me again to understand what they are facing and to discuss it?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the strong performance of schools in her area and the improvement in Ofsted judgments. It is also true, of course, that over the two years Somerset schools have benefited from a 5.9% increase in per-pupil funding, but I will of course be more than happy to meet her again to talk about the high-needs pressures and others that she mentioned.

20. [910575] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): When it comes to neurodiversity, some children in York are waiting two years for their diagnosis. The special educational needs and disabilities budget is overspent by £1.3 million and school cuts have been exacerbated, leaving parents and teachers seriously under-resourced to support their child, psychologically, socially and educationally, so how will the Secretary of State use the comprehensive spending review to ensure that all schools are fully funded to meet the needs of those children?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight this exceptionally important issue, and it is vital that we have the right education and the right support for every child, whatever their unique personal make-up. As I say, there have been pressures on the high-needs budget, which I totally recognise. There have been multiple reasons for that, as schools up and down the country identify. I will be happy to meet her to discuss the specific issues that she mentioned and how best we can address them.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) is also a successful marathon runner who deserves the approbation of the House.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words. May I take this opportunity to thank everyone across Barnsley for supporting me yesterday?

When the Government announced their new institutes of technology earlier this month, there was not a single one in South Yorkshire or West Yorkshire, and just two across the whole of the north. Will the Secretary of State review that decision and support new applicants from those areas?

Damian Hinds: The creation of institutes of technology is a very exciting development, and there will be more to come. This is a great opportunity to improve the provision of higher technical education throughout the country; as time goes on, I anticipate that there will be more of them.

I join Mr Speaker in congratulating the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) on their great efforts in the marathon.

School Funding: North-East

11. **Mr Stephen Hepburn** (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of funding for schools in the north-east. [910565]

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Funding for schools in the north-east has increased by 2.9% per pupil compared to 2017-18, which is equivalent to an extra £77.4 million in total, when rising pupil numbers are taken into account.

Mr Hepburn: The Government are continually telling us that record levels of funding are going into education, but it is about time we found out where it is going, because the average secondary school in the north-east will be £190,000 a year worse off than it was in 2015.

Damian Hinds: No; as I was saying to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), the national funding formula allocates at least 1% over two years in respect of each pupil, and that goes up to 6% per pupil in historically underfunded areas. In a few exceptional cases, it is even more than that. It is incredibly important that we have the right resourcing in place for children's education throughout the country, and that is another reason why we will be making a strong case on behalf of education in the spending review.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): On Saturday afternoon, I heard the amazingly talented steel band from Prince Bishops Community Primary School. The Secretary of State has cut the amount per child by £600 in that school. It is in the top 10% of most deprived wards, so can he explain why this has happened?

Damian Hinds: We have not done that. As I was saying a moment ago, we have increased the allocation of funding in respect of each pupil through the national funding formula. Local authorities make the final decision on the allocation of funding between schools, according to issues such as the proportion of children with special educational needs, but I would be happy to sit down with the hon. Lady to look specifically at the numbers that she has talked about in respect of that individual school.

Apprenticeships: Careers Guidance

13. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of (a) careers information and (b) guidance on apprenticeships for young people. [910567]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): All schools and colleges must provide careers information, advice and guidance to 12 to 18-year-olds.

Since January 2018, schools have been required, under what is commonly known as the Baker clause, to invite providers of technical education and apprenticeships to talk to pupils, in order to give them the full picture of their options. A third of technical education and apprenticeship providers say that the situation has improved since that requirement came in, but we know that there is more to do.

Mr Sharma: Employers have told me that they work in a constantly evolving environment, and that if we are to avoid falling behind the rest of the world, we need a workforce that is able to cope with digital change. What is the Minister doing to ensure that engineering apprenticeships include training in digital skills, so that no young person is left behind in the modern digital economy?

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that it is increasingly important for young people to have those digital skills. I refer him to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's website, where he will be able to see the 400 apprenticeship standards that have been developed, many of which involve digital skills. From 2020, we are introducing the first T-levels, the first of which will be a digital T-level.

School Curriculum

15. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that schools provide a broad curriculum. [910570]

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): State-funded schools in England must offer a broad and balanced curriculum, which for maintained schools includes the national curriculum. Subject to the consultation outcome, Ofsted's new framework will place the curriculum at the heart of inspection, with an emphasis on schools providing a broad, balanced and ambitious curriculum for all pupils, together with an emphasis on the EBacc for secondary schools.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister for that answer. Across the House this afternoon, colleagues have mentioned the importance to a broad-based curriculum of music, drama, sport, public speaking, outdoor pursuits and many other things. I am delighted to hear that Ofsted will need to look at this, but does he agree that it is vital that these activities should be offered by all schools in all areas, not just by the schools in which parents and others can provide contributions to ensure that these activities happen?

Nick Gibb: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. All the areas that he has cited are vital for children in schools. Art and music are compulsory in the national curriculum up to age 14, and the Government have provided almost £500 million between 2016 and 2018 for arts education programmes. As he pointed out, Ofsted's proposed framework increases the emphasis on schools' provision of a broad curriculum, and inspectors will also expect to see rich extracurricular activities for pupils.

Mr Speaker: Mr Fysh? Let us hear from you on this—the curriculum, T-levels, etc.

17. [910572] **Mr Marcus Fysh** (Yeovil) (Con): The breadth of the curriculum is important, particularly when it comes to colleges. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Yeovil College on its successful institute of technology bid, which will enable the delivery of a much broader curriculum? Will he also meet me to discuss course funding? There is some concern about whether the capital funding made available for the initial T-level pilots will be available for subsequent ones, and in the further roll-out.

Nick Gibb: I congratulate Yeovil College on its achievement. I can tell my hon. Friend that £38 million of capital will be made available for T-level development and that an extra £500 million a year will be allocated to that sector of our education system once the courses are up and running.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We are under considerable pressure of time, but time must be found to hear the voice of Watford.

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Before anyone asks, I did not run the marathon yesterday; I thought I should give other hon. Members a chance. However, I would like to declare a new—

Mr Speaker: How about saying, “Question No. 16”?

Condition Improvement Fund

16. **Richard Harrington** (Watford) (Con): What his timescale is for the disbursement of allocations from the condition improvement fund. [910571]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I congratulate all colleagues who ran the marathon. The disbursements of funding for successful projects under the condition improvement fund 2019-20 will start in June.

Richard Harrington: I must disclose an interest, in that I am now a director of the Watford UTC, and I thank Lord Agnew for all the help he has given that university technical college.

I am delighted that four schools in Watford were successful in their bids to the fund for improvements, which is known as the CIF—I know that that sounds like a disinfectant, but it is actually really important. The successful schools were Watford Grammar School for Boys, the Grove Academy, the Orchard Primary School and Parmiter’s School. This is excellent news, but will my hon. Friend give me an idea of when the schools will receive the money from this welcome funding boost?

Nadhim Zahawi: Academies and sixth-form colleges can apply for funding over two financial years. The funding starts in June, and allocations for new projects will continue up until spring 2021. My hon. Friend has been a champion for children and schools in Watford.

Topical Questions

T1. [910580] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): This month we published a consultation on proposals for a register of children not in school, including a legal responsibility to register children and for authorities to provide extra support for home-educating parents. We announced the first 12 institutes of technology to boost higher technical skills in science, technology, engineering and maths, setting more young people on a clear path to a high-skilled, high-wage career.

This is the last Education questions ahead of thousands of young people starting their GCSE and A-level exams. All hon. Members will want to take this opportunity to wish those young people well, and to thank the hard-working teachers in all our constituencies who have helped them to prepare.

Alan Brown: Can it be confirmed that if EU students studying in Scotland apply for immigration status after a three-year grace period, they will not be given any priority, and that if they are rejected by a hostile Home Office, they will be sent packing before they have completed their course?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation set out earlier the arrangements that are in place to allow people to convert, and to ensure that young people from other countries are able to take full advantage of the excellent education available at universities in Scotland and in England. Of course, there are four-year courses in England as well as in Scotland.

T4. [910583] **Trudy Harrison** (Copeland) (Con): Apprenticeships in Copeland are ensuring that we can continue the legacy of world-class skills, but further education also often enables people of all ages to earn while they learn. What is being done to ensure that further education and colleges have sustainable long-term funding?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): I congratulate my hon. Friend on continuing to press the case for the funding that further education needs. We are reviewing the sustainability of further education ahead of the spending review. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her particular work on apprenticeships.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Last week, we heard that 55 staff at the University of Winchester are facing redundancy as a result of the Treasury’s pensions bill, and the University of Cumbria is considering leaving the teachers’ pension scheme altogether. Will the Minister rethink before that trickle becomes a flood?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Department had a consultation that also looked at the teachers’ pension scheme for further education, schools and independent schools. Obviously, there is only so much money to go around. We need to ensure that organisations such as further education colleges, which have no choice but to offer the teachers’ pension scheme, are protected.

I understand that this is unwelcome news for universities that are having to face increased bills, but in terms of ensuring that universities are financially sustainable, recent reports have shown that the universities sector is in good health. We need to ensure that universities work with the Office for Students, which is clear that when it comes to universities' registration plans, financial sustainability is key and is marked down for five years. We want to work with universities to make sure they can offer the best experience to students.

Angela Rayner: I am sure those watching will say that the Minister's response of "unwelcome news" is just not good enough.

One of the most important things in the education sector is the early years provision. Will the Education Secretary confirm that funding for Sure Start has fallen yet again? It is down by another 12% on his watch. Now that the Prime Minister has announced and promised an end to austerity, can the Education Secretary tell us when the cuts will stop for our tots?

Chris Skidmore: This Government are spending £3.5 billion on early years entitlement, and we are absolutely committed to ensuring that pupils get the best start in life as early as possible. The hon. Lady hits on the crux of the issue: to ensure that we have an education system that is sustainable and works for everyone, we need to make sure that all parts of the Department for Education are properly financed.

The hon. Lady's commitment on the teachers' pension scheme has to compete with other commitments within the education system. We will have an urgent question later about EU student finance, and I see in the papers that she has stated she would give free tuition fees to EU students. The point here is that money for EU students comes out of the pockets of Sure Start. The issue she has to address is where the money is coming from in the Department for Education for all her unfunded announcements. It is simply not acceptable for her to stand at the Dispatch Box and make commitments that will only disappoint people in the long term.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Green; get in there, man.

T5. [910584] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards agree that when Bolton Council oversees a huge level of house building, it should provide additional school places in new schools at the heart of those new communities, rather than doubling the size of existing schools, which causes traffic problems and prevents children from walking to school?

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): I agree with my hon. Friend that in many instances, it may be better to build a new primary school than to expand an existing school, and a variety of factors will need to be weighed up in making such decisions: the quality of existing provision; the impact on existing schools and the community; and the overall costs and value for money.

T2. [910581] **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Tony Davies, the headteacher of St Matthew's Primary School in Cambridge, recently told a national newspaper of his

fury when he learned of a £60,000 budget cut to his school next year. The school is much loved by pupils and parents, but it will now have to cut its core education services. Does the Minister share Mr Davies's fury?

Nick Gibb: As we have said a number of times during this Question Time, under the national funding formula, every local authority is being funded with more money for every pupil in every school—a minimum of 1% more, and up to 6% more for schools that have been historically underfunded.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): If a school receives a pupil after the census cut-off date, it does not receive the per-pupil funding for the rest of that financial year. This is costing schools in my Lewes constituency around £4,000 per pupil. What is the Minister going to do to look again at the issue of the census cut-off date?

Nick Gibb: Lagged funding, of course, has an advantage in providing stability for the school system. Particularly where pupil numbers fall, for example, a school will know that it will not see an immediate drop in its funding. We keep the growth factor funding issue under review for those schools that are experiencing exceptionally high increases in pupil numbers, and we also keep this factor of the national funding formula under review.

T6. [910585] **Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): Can the Minister tell the House when the Augar review of post-18 education and student funding is likely to report? I hope he does not just say, "Soon." Will he outline the steps the Department is taking to ensure that Augar's proposals do not adversely affect or reduce university funding, or create a more uncertain financial environment for universities?

Damian Hinds: I would like to take this opportunity to thank Philip Augar and his team for the very thorough piece of work they are doing, looking at post-18 education and its financing. Of course, that covers both the university route and others. It is an incredibly important piece of work. I do not have a date to give the hon. Lady today; I will avoid using the "s" word, but we will come back on this before too long. While I am on my feet, let me say that we have mentioned everybody else who ran the marathon and who has stood up today, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) also put in a very creditable performance.

Mr Speaker: I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green); I was not aware of that, but I am now, and I thank him for what he has done.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Although I welcome the focus on phonics, recent research suggests that that method of teaching is less effective for children who have a specific learning disability, such as dyslexia. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that resources will be allocated to provide teachers with the specialist training needed to support those pupils who find it hard to learn using phonics? Will he ensure that this research is taken into account when assessing the literacy levels of dyslexic children?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is right; quality teaching with a differentiated approach ensures that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, including dyslexia, develop key skills, such as spelling. We are funding the

Whole School SEND Consortium, in order to bring together practitioners and networks, so that they can build a community of practice, identify school SEND improvements, and exchange knowledge and expertise.

T7. [910586] **Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): A recent survey I sent to schools in my constituency found that 82% have had their budget cut in real terms for the current academic year, and 88% were pessimistic about their funding over the next three years. Will the Minister meet me and headteachers from my constituency to discuss these findings in more detail, including the implications of the Government's cuts for our children and young people?

Nick Gibb: The national funding formula came into effect in 2018-19, the last financial year, and it is in effect in this financial year, 2019-20. We are maintaining per-pupil spending in real terms in both those financial years. As I have said, since 2017 we have been allocating to local authorities more money for every pupil in every school.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes, Mr Wragg. You were a teacher. I think we should hear from you.

Mr Wragg: It was an undistinguished career, Mr Speaker. May I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for visiting Romiley Primary School in my constituency with me on Friday, for very constructive discussions with the headteacher and governors? I urge him to have similarly constructive discussions with our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer on matters such as the apprenticeship levy, per-pupil funding and the high-needs budget.

Damian Hinds: I very much enjoyed and got a lot from my visit to Romiley on Friday; I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Discussions with headteachers and governing bodies are so important in learning about specific pressures on schools, and in helping us to develop our response to them.

T9. [910588] **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): Last Friday, a very special man, Ian Dickson, and his dedicated team of volunteers made possible the Care Experienced Conference, which was led by and involved care experienced people. I had the honour of being there; it was emotive, powerful and uplifting. The current care system was rightly characterised as being one of repeated loss, often lacking in love, emotional warmth and hugs. The Minister knows that that heartbreaking statement is true. How much longer are these voices going to be ignored? When will he do the right thing and commit to a wholesale review of our utterly broken care system?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I know the hon. Lady is passionate about the care system, having been a social worker. We are introducing reforms—both workforce reforms with the national assessment and accreditation system, and through the investment we are making in “Strengthening Families, Protecting Children”, for which £84 million was announced at the Budget. Of course, we will also

put our best foot forward, working with the sector, to make sure that the financial challenges are highlighted at the spending review.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I put an eccentric point of view to the Secretary of State? If we make a manifesto commitment, we should keep it. Two years after breaking our manifesto commitment to set up Catholic free schools, we were promised new, voluntary-aided Catholic schools. I am told by the Catholic Education Service that not a single one has yet opened, anywhere in the country. If it is a pipeline, it is a very long one. What is he doing about it?

Damian Hinds: Schools do take a while to build. My right hon. Friend is right that I made a commitment, including a personal commitment to him and others, that we would make sure that faith schools, including Catholic schools, would be able to open in areas where there was the demographic need and the demand for them. That commitment absolutely remains in place.

T10. [910589] **Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): On Friday, I met people from two schools in my Bristol South constituency, and funding and the impact on children were the key concerns expressed. When the Secretary of State's Department reviews the work of his school resource management advisers, will that include a direct assessment of the impact of any recommended savings on pupil outcomes?

Damian Hinds: Yes. Our resource management advice programme is all about helping to support schools in what they do best. We expect the headteacher and the chair of governors of a small primary school to be expert at a remarkably wide array of things. It is absolutely right to offer support to schools, including on things such as financial management, but that is there to support the work that schools do in education.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I recently met David Prince and his 12-year-old daughter Holly, who is visually impaired. Holly benefits hugely from the specialist teacher advisory service provided by Hampshire County Council, but the council proposes cutting the funding for this life-changing service, which helped Holly to learn to use a cane, and trained her in mobility. Will a Minister work with me to help Holly, her father and Hampshire County Council find resources so that vulnerable children in Fareham do not have to go without a rich education?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will happily look into that case and take it offline.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): When the Timpson review finally passes the editing process at the Department for Education, will it include an analysis of whether a lack of funding for pastoral and family-support staff is driving exclusions?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady will not have too long to wait for Edward's report and our response to it. When it comes, she will find that it is a comprehensive and thorough piece of work. We have been looking carefully at all the relevant aspects to make sure that we can guarantee that, as was said earlier, when somebody

is excluded, it is not only the end of something, but the start of something positive and new. We support schools' being able to make such decisions, which remain an important part of behaviour management in schools.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for the support that he and his Department have given to Fowey River Academy, which is re-brokering out of the discredited Adventure Learning Academy Trust into the Leading Edge Academies Partnership this Wednesday. The re-brokering process has been complex, so will the Secretary of State look into it to see how we can minimise the disruption and uncertainty for all those involved?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right that we have to get the process right. We continue to keep the process under review. I would be happy for either me or my noble Friend Lord Agnew to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that case.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Recent figures show that areas with the greatest need have seen the biggest decline in the number of apprenticeship starts in the past year, with new starts in Bradford South falling by around 50%. I thank the Minister for visiting my constituency, but I am extremely concerned that the current apprenticeship scheme may be widening rather than narrowing the gap between different parts of the country. Will the Minister outline her plans to remedy the situation?

Anne Milton: It was a pleasure to visit the hon. Lady's constituency, where we saw examples of real excellence in the provision of apprenticeships. We have two specific projects, including the 5 Cities project, which is increasing diversity, and we are working in four separate areas to see whether we can make sure that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can access high-quality apprenticeships, because they often lack the social capital that others from less disadvantaged backgrounds have.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Jenn Willmitt and her team at Willenhall E-Act Academy, which has been moved out of special measures following a recent Ofsted inspection?

Damian Hinds: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Mrs Willmitt on that achievement.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The rationing of special needs funding means that Derbyshire County Council is asking schools not to apply for support until pupils are at least two years behind in educational terms, meaning that they often never get the support that they need. Will the Secretary of State look with me at how county councils are implementing this rationing, to ensure that pupils get the support that they need when they need it?

Nadhim Zahawi: We have launched ambitious SEND reforms, which I have spoken about at the Dispatch Box before, but I will happily meet the hon. Lady to look at the specific issue she mentions.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Will Ministers join me in congratulating Queen Emma's Primary School in Witney on its recent Ofsted success, and will they join me in noting that it is the school's use of phonics combined with a broad, attractive curriculum that is providing an outstanding education for the children of Witney at primary, secondary and beyond?

Nick Gibb *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The mention of phonics is usually a magnet for the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb).

Nick Gibb: I was determined that no one else would answer this question, Mr Speaker. I send my congratulations to Queen Emma's Primary School on a wonderful set of results in its Ofsted inspection. Phonics is the most effective way of teaching young children to read, and 82% are now reaching the expected standard. There is a direct link between reaching the expected standard in a phonics check and reaching the expected standard in the key stage 2 reading test: 88% of those who reach the expected standard in a phonics check go on to reach the expected standard in reading at key stage 2.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Minister previously spoke warmly of his desire to maintain good relations with Europe after Brexit. Is he aware of the very recent comments by Guy Verhofstadt, the EU Parliament's Brexit negotiator, that students should not be "victims of Brexit", and that he intends to write to the Prime Minister to say that the EU will never accept the Government's hike in tuition fees for EU students? How does the Minister think that the PM will answer?

Chris Skidmore: We are about to have an urgent question on this specific issue, but I would say that this is part of negotiations on our future partnership with the EU, which we could be having now if people like the hon. Lady had voted for the deal and allowed us to get on with it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: We have run out of time, but in admiration of the marathon man—or one of the marathon people—in the Chamber, and his persistence in springing to his feet despite his athletic endeavours yesterday, I call Mr Tom Pursglove.

Tom Pursglove: Thank you, Mr Speaker; that is very generous. As it is highly topical, may I ask how my right hon. Friend is getting on with encouraging schools to roll out the Daily Mile initiative, particularly given that I have visited the Hazel Leys Academy in Corby to open the new running track? The school is embracing the initiative, and that is great—fantastic. Will the Minister congratulate it?

Nadhim Zahawi: It is a pleasure to congratulate the school and highlight how important the Daily Mile is, as well as the work we are doing with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that as many schools as possible deliver the Daily Mile.

Tuition Fees: EU Students

3.42 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on Government policy regarding tuition fees for EU students after the UK has left the European Union.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government have repeatedly made it clear that we absolutely value international exchange and collaboration in education and training as part of our vision for a global Britain. We believe that the UK and European countries should continue to give young people and students the chance to benefit from each other's world-leading universities post exit.

Over the weekend, the media reported on a leaked Cabinet document discussing Government policy on EU student access to finance products for the 2020-21 academic year and beyond. At this time, I want to tell the House that no decision has yet been made on the continued access to student finance for EU students. Discussions at Cabinet level are ongoing and should remain confidential. I will make no comment on this apparent leak, which is deeply regrettable.

Students from the EU make a vital contribution to the university sector. It is testament to the quality and reputation of our higher education system that so many students from abroad choose to come and study here. As I stated earlier, since 2017 EU student numbers are up 3.8% and non-EU student numbers are up by 4.9%. In July 2018, we announced that students from the European Union starting courses in England in the 2019-20 academic year will continue to be eligible for home fees status, which means that they will be charged the same tuition fees as UK students and have access to tuition fee loans for the duration of their studies. Applications for students studying in academic year 2020-21 open in September 2019 and the Government will provide sufficient notice for prospective EU students and the wider higher education sector on fee arrangements ahead of the 2020-21 academic year and the subsequent years, which, as I have just stated, will obviously reflect our future relationship with European Union and the negotiations on that going forward.

Angela Rayner: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. We have all read in the leaked reports that the Secretary of State plans to withdraw the home fee status for EU nationals from 2020 onwards. The Minister cannot confirm the Government's policy today, so when will universities get the certainty they need to plan for their future? Has his Department carried out any assessment of how many EU students would no longer study here as a result of this change?

At a time when the finances of universities are a matter of increasing concern, what impact will these changes have on the sustainability of our institutions? This issue should concern us all. International students make a net contribution to the public finances of tens of billions of pounds a year, so can the Minister tell us how much our public services will lose if fewer EU

students come to study here, and how much education exports would fall by if EU students lost home fee status?

Only a month ago, the Secretary of State, along with the International Trade Secretary, launched an international education strategy. They said that education exports would reach £25 billion a year by 2030 and international student numbers would reach 600,000 by the same year. How can they publish this strategy one month, and then pursue a strategy that will undermine it the next? Does he still expect that 600,000 international students will come to the UK every year by 2030 if this rise in tuition fees is introduced?

Time and again, this Government have undermined our universities through their shambolic handling of Brexit. The future of Erasmus and Horizon 2020 are already in doubt, and now the very opportunities that we offer to young people from across the EU are being taken away. It is not in our interest to build walls between our world-class universities and our nearest neighbours, yet this Government are committed to doing exactly that.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this urgent question. It is important that we all recognise that EU students and staff make a vital contribution to our universities. It is also important that those people understand that the Government are determined to ensure that, even though we are leaving the European Union, we are not leaving our academic research partnerships behind. While I sit in the Department for Education as Minister for Universities, I also—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) is chuntering; either he wants to hear my answer or he does not. When it comes to setting out a position, it is important that this House does not go down a route of unnecessary negativity and does not somehow send out a message that the United Kingdom is an unwelcoming place.

We are determined when it comes to our universities and our EU student exchanges, and we have set out the international education strategy, which has the ambition of 600,000 extra international students by 2030, as well as setting an investment figure of £35 billion. *[Interruption.]* As the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) says—if she would not interrupt me—the economic importance of our higher education sector is reflected in the need to attract EU students and students from across the globe. That is the crux of the matter. We want to ensure that our nation is attractive internationally.

We have given commitments and guarantees regarding all successful Erasmus participations and regarding the Horizon 2020 science programmes, from which so many of our universities benefit. We made it a priority very early on after the referendum that we would set out the post-EU exit Government guarantee and the Government guarantee extension—that is, that we would fund the lifetime of these projects before Brexit if these applications were successful, and even post Brexit to December 2020.

We are drawing up our immigration system for January 2021 onwards. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East is again chuntering. Labour Members have called for an urgent question; either they want me to answer it or they do not. The point is that they are threatening a situation and claiming that we are somehow turning our backs to our European

[Chris Skidmore]

partners. That simply is not the case. With regard to our negotiations, I have spoken to about 15 European higher education Ministers. We need to make sure that we commit to them that Britain remains an attractive place for students from all nations across the world to come for work and to study. That is why we have established our international education strategy, why we have made the commitment on the guarantee, and why, rightly, we continue to work on our negotiations with the EU. If we had signed and passed a deal in this House, we would have had the certainty going forward to December 2020. Labour Members, with their Janus-faced—two-faced—approach, cast aspersions about the levels of uncertainty with regard to EU student funding when we would have guaranteed that funding for the next two years but they decided to vote against it. We need to work with universities globally to make sure that we raise our attainment. Our universities are world-class, with four in the world top 10 and 18 in the top 100. We want to support our universities. That is why we have published the international education strategy and why we want to work with them going forward.

Labour already offers students supposedly free tuition fees. Of course, there is no such thing as free tuition fees—they are paid for by the taxpayer, and this would cost the taxpayer an additional £12.5 billion. Labour's additional policy, now, of saying that it would fund all EU students coming here to be able to study free of charge without having to pay back their tuition fees would cost at least £445 million a year. We have talked about magic money trees in the past—when it comes to Labour, it seems that we are talking about a magic money forest. We need to make sure that we have a fiscally responsible Government who look after our universities. That also means ensuring that we do not deceive our universities by claiming that we can spend money that we do not have.

It is not right that we should discriminate against our other international students. Does the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne believe that we should offer a student finance package for European students once we have left the EU—a system that we have belonged to as members of the EU? Once we are no longer members of the EU, is it right that we then discriminate against Indian students or Chinese students? What does she say to them? How would she address the fact that her policy would discriminate against most of the students across the globe, at the same time as not having the money to be able to fund these student places?

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are going to spend limited hard-pressed taxpayers' funds, it would be better to spend them on the poorest countries in this world—the developing nations—and not on some of the richest, most well-to-do countries in the world?

Chris Skidmore: It is important to reflect on our obligations with regard to international policy in terms of both higher education and our sustainable development goals agreed by the United Nations. That is why, in science and research, we have looked at things like the global challenges research fund, which focuses specifically on developing nations, and the Newton fund, worth £735 million, which also focuses on those developing

nations. We want to ensure that we can be developing student partnerships and exchanges with all countries. I recently met the organisers of the Fulbright scholarships. Last December, we increased the amount going into those scholarships by about £400,000. We have also set up the Generation UK programme for China.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is interesting to hear the Minister talk about these UK taxpayer-funded schemes, because we know that many of the people involved in them are not able to get visas to come and collaborate with their colleagues here in the UK, so the system is already failing.

The SNP recognises that our EU students are a national asset. As such, the Scottish Government have confirmed that EU students starting courses in Scotland in 2020 will continue to receive free tuition, because these young people across the EU are already planning where they are going to be studying in 2020. Can the Minister confirm when the fee status of EU nationals starting courses in England in 2020 will be announced? They must know this very soon, or we will lose them anyway. The European temporary leave to remain scheme will not suit many courses, as was mentioned in Education questions. Will he therefore work with the Home Office to ensure that his scheme matches a course rather than matches an idea that suits a very small number of students?

Contrary to the assertions of the Universities Minister earlier, the Higher Education Statistics Agency reports that after years of growth in EU student numbers, enrolments of EU students dropped for the first time last year. He must recognise that. We are already making the UK a less attractive place to study, and that is economically damaging. Although he is right to recognise the importance of international students, having EU students enables richer participation in schemes such as Horizon 2020. The Government have expressed enthusiasm to participate in the successor programme. How does he envisage that happening when our credibility in Europe has been undermined? Finally, the post-study work scheme has been economically and culturally beneficial to Scotland. When will the scheme be reintroduced for international students from the EU and further afield?

Chris Skidmore: I will touch on several points that the hon. Lady made. During oral questions we heard concerns raised about the right to remain. I regularly meet Scottish Minister Richard Lochhead, and I will reflect upon representations he has made to me and work with the Home Office. The immigration White Paper will look at all issues relating to visas or post-study work schemes. It is important that that consultation takes place, and I urge Members to participate in it.

At the moment, we are keen to look at association to the successor scheme to Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe. That will begin later this year. The key point is that postgraduate tuition fees are separate from undergraduate tuition fees, and we do not want to do anything that will damage the potential of UK universities to research and continue with their research partnerships. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) seems keen to keep on chuntering from a sedentary position. He is welcome to make a contribution in a moment, but I am trying to answer the points made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan).

I welcome the hon. Lady mentioning that this is taxpayers' money and that subsidy is involved. It is right that we consider how that subsidy is spent effectively. I urge caution that we do not simply send out a message that EU students happen to be unique. We want students from all parts of the globe—Chinese students, Indian students and students from the ASEAN countries—to be involved and raise their opportunity, and to send out a crucial message that when it comes to soft power, the UK will remain a global leader in higher education.

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his explanation; I know he thinks deeply about these issues. Does he agree that if we want our university sector to continue to be world-leading, our action must match our ambition? While no decision has been made on this policy, the cumulative impact of some of our policy decisions—whether it is the proposed immigration cap, which would make it more difficult for researchers from abroad to work and study here, or this policy, which would hike up fees for EU students, or the lack of clarity on Erasmus—could be that we undermine the university sector and make it more difficult for young people from this country to live, study and work abroad, and this Government could be portrayed as one who are against young people.

Chris Skidmore: I thank my predecessor for his remarks. The work that he did so soon after we voted to leave the European Union, making the Government guarantee in July 2018 and extending student finance for home fees last year, has set us in a position that is welcome among our European partners. I would also like to put on record my thanks for the work he did in establishing the high-level group on EU exit, which meets monthly. It gives the opportunity for university professionals, including the Russell Group, the University Alliance and MillionPlus, to meet and discuss issues of concern and to ensure that those are fed in internally and that we listen to those points—and we are listening.

We are listening when it comes to the consultation on the immigration White Paper. We are listening when it comes to ensuring that we have a sustainable future with our relationship with the European Union. We are listening when it comes to working on our plans for future association with and participation in the International Science Council, including on making guarantees about Horizon 2020 and looking at association on Horizon Europe. It is right that the Government do this, in tandem with working across all Departments with a cross-Government approach to looking at how we exit the European Union, and I will continue to make sure that I play my role as Universities Minister in backing our universities.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The political declaration agreed between the EU and the UK talks about establishing

“general principles, terms and conditions for the United Kingdom’s participation in Union programmes...in areas such as science and innovation, youth, culture and education”.

Do I take it from the reply the Minister has given this afternoon that the question of tuition fees—fees charged to EU students studying here in the UK and to UK students studying elsewhere in the EU—does not come within the terms of that wording, and that if that is the

case, there is no bar to the Government choosing to increase those fees before any negotiations on the future partnership with the EU have even begun?

Chris Skidmore: I think the right hon. Gentleman is pointing to paragraph 61—is it?—of the political declaration on the future partnership with the EU. I wish he would support the political declaration, alongside voting for the deal, because we could then get on with discussing those issues with our European partners.

When it comes to Horizon and Erasmus, part of the reason why we find ourselves in difficulties is the uncertainty that there is without knowing whether we are in a deal or a no-deal situation. For all the Opposition Members talking about instability and the lack of certainty, it is on their backs that this is taking place. Those voting against the deal have prevented us from moving on to phase 2 of the negotiations.

We have made commitments on 2019-20 student finance, and we will shortly be making an announcement for 2020-21, ready for applications opening in September 2019. Obviously, any future financial obligations will be part of the spending review, and it is right that they are looked at by the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, generally speaking, the rule the Government should adopt, given the unfortunate decision that this country has taken to leave the European Union and in order to make our way in the world to the greatest advantage, is that we must retain a very open system to allow the brightest and the best to come and study here from all over the world at equal rates of charging, but also with a regime that allows them to stay here and work in an orderly, sensible manner that is easily enforced?

Chris Skidmore: From the international perspective of the United Kingdom’s universities, I entirely agree that we now have the highest ever number of applications from foreign countries—about 158,000.¹ Looking at this in the round, it is important to reflect on the fact that people want to come to the United Kingdom, and we have an obligation to ensure that we make that possible. However, I suggest that we will support our universities and ensure, as we develop our partnership with the European Union, that we do not exclude those from other foreign countries. That is why we will shortly be publishing our international research and innovation strategy, in addition to the international education strategy. It will ensure that we have a cross-Government approach not just to finance but to the welfare of students, so that when it comes to mental health, accommodation and the full range of student experience, we align in a way that ensures international students feel welcome in this country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I tell the Minister that this was a deeply disappointing statement? He may not have been chuntering, but he was certainly not sending out a clear message. I do not know of a university leader, or university town or city, that is persuaded by the kind of stuff he is saying about the role of universities in the coming years. The fact of the matter is that there has always been the possibility of being a citizen of Europe for someone who is wealthy, like many of the people on his Back Benches, but not for an ordinary member of this society. Our students

1. [Official Report, 9 May 2019, Vol. 659, c. 10MC.]

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

have been able to be European citizens—that is what they value—but now they have been cheated of that. This will not be about pounds, shillings and pence, but about robbing young people of the heritage of being real European citizens.

Chris Skidmore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Further to a previous intervention of his, I am looking forward to coming up to Huddersfield on 10 May. That demonstrates that I do take action when he asks about my commitment to universities. I am looking forward to meeting the vice-chancellor and other university representatives there, and I am sure that they will discuss these issues with me.

When it comes to opportunities for UK students, it is worth noting that, yes, 16,000 UK students benefit from a European education—that is obviously part of the current system through the EU structures—but that contrasts with a total of 34,000 UK students who are educated internationally, in both EU and non-EU countries. We want to be able to grow that number as well. There is, however, a disproportionate impact on the number of UK students studying in the EU compared with the number of EU students studying in the UK. We would obviously wish to rebalance that and ensure that UK students have the opportunity to study abroad, both in the EU and outside it.

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the Minister has been to the University of Huddersfield before.

Chris Skidmore *indicated dissent.*

Mr Speaker: Not yet. Well, I myself gave a lecture there on 24 June 2016, and it is a very fine establishment indeed. I hope that the Minister enjoys his visit there as much as I enjoyed mine.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Last November, the EU27 and the UK agreed to the 147-point document about the future framework. Point 11, right at the top, sets out the ongoing commitment to co-operation in science, innovation, youth, culture and education. It calls for

“fair and appropriate financial contribution”

and “fair treatment of participants”. Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to help support our ongoing co-operation on science and students is to vote for the withdrawal agreement and firm up the details of our ongoing co-operation, as already agreed between the UK and the EU27?

Chris Skidmore: Absolutely. As a Minister, I am keen to move to the next stages of the negotiations around our future partnerships—in fact I am desperate to do so. I encourage Members who voted against the deal to recognise that it is a great deal when it comes to continuing our education and science partnerships.

I attended the EU Competitiveness Council on 18 February, and I talked to EU Ministers. They recognise the world-leading position of UK universities and that the UK does disproportionately well out of scientific grants. We put £4 billion into Horizon 2020, but we get £5.7 billion back. Why would we not want to continue to participate in that?

We are moving on to Horizon Europe as the next process of the scientific partnerships. I will attend the EU Competitiveness Council on 28 May as Science Minister. I will discuss with colleagues on the margins issues such as Erasmus education partnerships and exchanges, which the deal would also have protected. I urge all hon. Members to give me the opportunity to go to Brussels and get on with the next stage of the negotiations.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If UK universities have to increase their fees for EU students and the EU universities reciprocate, will that not mean that only the richest UK students will be able to study abroad? What specifically does the Minister intend to do about that?

Chris Skidmore: I go back to the statement. All these issues around reciprocal arrangements and partnerships are matters for future negotiations. I am keen to make sure that we can get on to that page. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will now vote for the deal, to make sure that we can do so.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, post Brexit, we want to continue to attract bright students from many countries all over the world? The proposal that we should exempt EU students from paying fees yet impose them on those from other countries is inherently unfair and, in fact, discriminatory. It does not make economic sense or reflect the open Britain that we are striving to create.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab) She’s not voting for your deal either.

Chris Skidmore: I urge my hon. Friend to do so as well. I will not discriminate on either side of the House. It is a great deal, which will provide us with certainty. We have been closely involved with our European partners for many decades. Ensuring that we continue some of those partnerships, which have both social and economic value, is important.

My hon. Friend is right about the international perspective. People voted to leave the European Union to ensure that Britain can be outward-looking, positive, not insular and not nativist. We want to be able to reach out to other countries and meet our responsibilities on the sustainable development goals. We want students from India and ASEAN—Association of Southeast Asian Nations—countries who want to come to the UK to study, but cannot at the present time, to have the opportunity to do so. Why should European students be given a disproportionate opportunity when it comes to fee levels? She has a valid point.

Wes Streeting: UK higher education is one of our great national and international success stories, yet there can be no doubt that the Prime Minister’s immigration policies have done enormous damage to our international reputation. And here we are again—the cat is out of the bag—looking to charge EU students tuition fees and make as much money out of them as possible before the withdrawal agreement has even been signed. Will that not just use EU students as cash cows, but rob UK students of the opportunity to study abroad? How many more national success stories are we prepared to sacrifice on the altar of Brexit?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to national success stories, I want to ensure that our international education strategy provides opportunities for UK students to go to every corner of the globe, not just the EU. We have provided student finance for 2019-20 and will shortly be making an announcement on 2020-21. Any future decision on access to finance for EU nationals will come later on as part of the negotiations we will take forward. The hon. Gentleman's logic is: why not ensure that access to student finance is free for every student internationally? The Labour Front Benchers have just proposed a policy that would ensure that British taxpayers pay for European students' fees in their entirety. I do not feel that that is necessarily best value for the taxpayer, and I am not sure his constituents would either.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Despite what all the doomsayers constantly claim, will the Minister confirm for the record what is actually happening in relation to the numbers of foreign students coming into this country to study?

Chris Skidmore: As I stated, since 2017 there has been a 3.8% increase in EU students applying and a 4.9% increase in non-EU students. It is welcome that last year we had a record number of international students, both EU and non-EU, applying to our British universities. I congratulate all universities on being able to be so welcoming. We want that to continue.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Minister must know that the university recruitment cycle for 2020 is already under way, and the ability of UK universities to attract and recruit students from the EU will be seriously affected if the fee status remains uncertain. He has the ability to settle this matter today. We do not need to vote for a flawed withdrawal agreement; the Minister could simply roll the current arrangements forward.

Chris Skidmore: I recognise the hon. Lady's point, which was made to me by Vivienne Stern, the director of Universities UK International. The recruitment procedures are ongoing. Applications for the 2021 academic year will open in September, and I am keen for the Government to make an announcement shortly. We have to go through cross-Government processes, which is one of the reasons why we have seen this unfortunate leak in the first place. As a Minister, I am keen to ensure we can put that security in place for universities. I hope to ensure that we can do so in due course.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): With four of 10 of the top universities globally being in the UK, international students are fortunate to be able to access higher education in this country. As a member of the International Development Committee, I am keen that students from the developing world have the same access. Does the Minister agree that students from relatively well-off EU countries should not be subsidised at the cost of students coming here from the developing world for higher education?

Chris Skidmore: When we look at the new immigration system, the new student finance system that will emerge post '20-21 and whatever new system emerges on future scientific partnerships, it is important that we are bold and that we go beyond the status quo. What we have already established with developing countries, such as

the global challenges research fund and the Newton fund, ensures that British researchers can work in partnership with researchers from those countries. We should look at expanding those opportunities.

I am keen to expand opportunities that may not have existed before and to ensure that opportunities that were there previously are able to continue. I am sure that our international education strategy, as well as our international research and innovation strategies and the spending review—when it comes to looking at investments that we will need to make, that is obviously a critical part of the next financial framework—will have that international context in mind.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Change UK): I support the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) about the consequences of these proposals for universities. However, this is unfortunately yet another example of the damage that Brexit is likely to inflict on future generations of young people. The House will return to further discussion of Brexit soon. When he casts his vote on various options, will the Minister consider the damage that will be caused to our universities and to the standing of British higher education around the world by any Brexit?

Chris Skidmore: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Lady on this. The British people voted to leave, and I am determined to ensure that I fulfil my manifesto commitments to my constituency, which also voted to leave, by making sure that that happens. I want to ensure that we can mitigate any circumstances that may arise from leaving the European Union, to ensure that we continue to benefit from the opportunities that we have had as a member as we move forward into the new relationship with our EU partners and also move forward internationally.

On the votes, when it comes to looking at the deal and the future economic partnership, I ask the hon. Lady to please, although it sounds like she will not—*[Interruption.]* Brexit is happening, and we need to ensure that we have—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members seem to query that and suggest that they do not want it to happen, but I am afraid that is what the British people voted for. I am sure that when we, as a House—*[Interruption.]* I cannot actually believe what I am hearing from Opposition Members. When they stood in 2017, they also said that they were going to respect the result of the referendum; it sounds like they do not believe in the manifesto commitments that they made.

However, I believe that the deal is a good one. It is vital for scientific and education partnerships going forward, which it will protect for the next two years, and will allow for future negotiations, in order to make sure that we can continue to work with our European neighbours.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As a member of the board of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and for Crawley (Henry Smith) about the importance of encouraging students from low-income countries to come here. I would like us to provide more scholarships and bursaries out of our international development fund than we do at the moment; we are falling behind quite a number of other countries, but by doing that we can increase our influence. Does the

[Jeremy Lefroy]

Minister agree that it is absolutely vital to avoid any kind of cliff edge and have a smooth transition from the arrangement we have now, which is beneficial, to the future arrangement, and that we do not suddenly cut off opportunities, both for our students studying in the European Union and vice versa?

Chris Skidmore: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. When it comes to tropical diseases, future scientific research on climate change or the opportunities that agri-tech might present to developing countries, it is absolutely right that we look at what we can do to play our part to help the poorest countries across the globe in those endeavours. I will be happy to discuss with him, and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine when I am next up in Liverpool, any potential policy initiatives that he might have in this sphere.

On the point about a transition period, the deal is a transition. We will be able then to get round the table and open up the square brackets around our future relationship, which are currently closed because of Members' indecision and failure to back this EU deal—the EU helped to put it together and backs it also—so that we can move forwards together, safeguarding scientific partnerships and working on education partnerships.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): In many of his responses, the Minister has seemed to imply that being a member of the EU was stopping the UK having people from elsewhere in the world, but that is up to the Home Office here. He must recognise that the workforce is the biggest problem for all four UK health services. Medical and dental degrees take five years. Does he seriously think people will come here, pay enormous fees and then at three years roll the dice on whether they get a continuing visa?

Chris Skidmore: It is important to reflect that leaving the EU provides us with an opportunity to decide our own immigration policy—we are beginning that work for 2021 onwards, which is why we have the immigration White Paper and consultation—and the freedom to decide our own immigration policy. On the future position of fees, obviously we have been in the EU and have reciprocal fee requirements, but we also want to make sure that international students are not discriminated against, as they currently are—the hon. Lady cannot deny that international student fees are significantly more than those for EU students. It is important that we listen to universities about what future schemes for immigration and student exchange should look like.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister says he wants us to continue to enjoy the current benefits of our EU membership but after we have left the EU and that he wants us to vote for a withdrawal agreement to end discrimination against international students, but there is absolutely nothing stopping him today ruling out this increase in fees for EU students and the wider international student body. It matters greatly that we can attract people but also offer our young people those opportunities in EU countries. Does he not understand that his failure to rule out these increases today will have an impact on the decisions of students for 2019-20 in both the EU and the wider international student body?

Chris Skidmore: We have already guaranteed home fees status for EU students for the 2019-20 academic year. The decision for 2020-21 will be made shortly and applications will open in September 2019. I think that the guarantee for 2019-20 shows we are keen to work on this in the negotiations. It is a cross-Government piece of work. As I have mentioned, it is vital that we work on issues such as immigration and build international relationships, but that involves the Foreign Office and the Department for International Trade, which are involved in the international education strategy, which is why I cannot give such a guarantee on the Floor of the House. It is important that we have a joined-up piece of work from the Government and that we guarantee our responsibilities to our European partners—and I hope that, to do that, the House will vote for the deal to give us that opportunity—while continuing to build on commitments internationally.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Surely, the Minister must accept as a point of general principle that if a student wants to come to the UK to do an undergraduate degree, they should be able to apply for and obtain a visa that covers the whole period of that undergraduate degree and that it is utterly unfair and counterproductive to ask them to apply for a completely different type of visa either three quarters or three fifths of the way through.

Chris Skidmore: On this point about European temporary leave to remain, which we also discussed in oral questions earlier, I have spoken to the Scottish Higher Education Minister, Richard Lochhead, about the 36 months and the issue of moving to a four-year course, which disproportionately affects Scottish universities, and I have relayed those concerns to the Home Office. I hope that, given the White Paper approach to consultation, we can consider the implementation of a wide range of issues, including visas and the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. However, it is important to recognise that it is permissible to apply for a tier 4 visa to continue to study.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that the number of EU nationals applying to UK universities is already falling and will be down this year, even before Brexit bites fully? How does he suggest that universities should mitigate that loss of student numbers on the roll?

Chris Skidmore: There are currently a record 139,000 EU students at UK universities, and the number of EU applications has risen by 3.8% since 2017. It is important for us to put out a positive message rather than encouraging European students who may happen to be watching our exchanges not to apply. Of course they should apply. People say, "Erasmus will be affected, so do not apply," but the Government have given guarantees on Erasmus, on science research funding and on 2019-20 home fee status. We will make announcements about 2020-21 before September, so that students will have the necessary knowledge when they apply.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): A 17-year-old constituent of mine came to my surgery a few weeks ago in great distress. She has lived here for 16 years, since she was one year old. She is at St Roch's

Secondary School and wants to take a place at college, but she cannot obtain student finance to do so because, according to the rules, she does not qualify within the meaning of the Immigration Act 1971. Does the Minister not recognise that that is an absurd aberration? What will he do to help my constituent?

Chris Skidmore: I will happily take a look at that specific issue and take it up with the Student Loans Company, which I visited in Glasgow about a month ago, and I am happy to continue our correspondence about the issue.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Our higher education sector has been one of the great success stories of recent years, and we have seen huge expansion, which has been predicated on our being part of the European Union and attracting the best international students. The Minister speaks of talking this country down, but the reality is that universities such as Warwick, which is part of the Russell Group, have lost 3% of undergraduate applications from the EU and 9% of postgraduate applications. Will the Minister meet me, and the vice-chancellor of Warwick University—one of our finest international universities—to discuss his proposals and what their economic and financial impact will be?

Chris Skidmore: I should be happy to have the opportunity to meet the hon. Gentleman and the vice-chancellor of Warwick University. I do not remember exactly where Warwick comes in my universities tour, but it may be coming up shortly. I recognise its international importance. I last visited it two years ago, in a different ministerial guise, and had the opportunity to meet Lord Bhattacharyya, who, sadly, departed recently. He worked across an international field to establish the university's manufacturing centre.

I listen to concerns that are expressed. I have quoted figures that have been published, but some Members have raised issues relating to the current academic year, in respect of which figures have not been published. I want to ensure—as I do when I go to Brussels, when it comes to some of the negotiations on Horizon Europe—that I make the positive case that we want to protect postgraduate students in particular. We are committed to spending 2.4% of GDP on research and development, and if we are to hit that target by 2027, it is vital that we have a pipeline of talent that is national, European and international. That was a long answer to the hon. Gentleman's question, but, yes, I will certainly meet him and the vice-chancellor.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was pleased to hear that the Minister will shortly visit the University of Huddersfield. As he is coming north, I wonder whether he would like to travel a little further and visit the University of Hull. We should be very pleased to see him.

Many EU students are currently studying at Hull university. Can the Minister guarantee that no matter what they are studying, as undergraduates or postgraduates, they will not be affected by the proposed changes?

Chris Skidmore: I would certainly be delighted to come up to the University of Hull, which is one of the homes of one of my poetic heroes, Philip Larkin. I think also that Lord Norton of Louth still teaches politics at Hull. I would be keen, but I cannot guarantee

that that would be on the same day as Huddersfield. However, going forward, if we can get the deal across the line—again, I urge Members to allow the opportunity to be able to begin future negotiations on education partnerships and on looking at both science and research when it comes to higher education—I want to ensure that we have the opportunity to provide those guarantees post 2021, although, obviously, we have made the guarantee for 2019-20. We will shortly be making announcements when it comes to the 2020-21 academic year. Going forward, that will be a matter for future negotiations with our EU partners.

Mr Speaker: I was reading Philip Norton's text books as part of my undergraduate studies 35 years ago, but of course, Philip Norton was a very, very young man as a distinguished academic at that time. He does not seem to have got much older as far as I can tell.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): These exchanges have shown exactly the problems with the political declaration: the Minister talks about guarantees, but of course they are not guarantees; they are aspirations for future negotiation. But there is one thing he could do today, which is reassure the 17,000 Erasmus+ students who are likely to be approved in May or June this year about 2021. Could he at least do that?

Chris Skidmore: The Government guarantee, when it comes to participation in the Erasmus programmes, has stated that all successful participations as approved by the EU Commission will be eligible for the Government guarantee. I wrote to every single Higher Education Minister in Europe and the European economic area to ensure that they were aware of that guarantee commitment—many were not. I think that it is often a case of communication to make sure people are aware so that when it comes to those Erasmus participations being approved, the Government will fund them—not just for the year, but for the entirety of the exchange programme as it takes place.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On EU students, the Minister will know that, as he plans to raise the drawbridge into England through raising fees, in Wales we intend to keep a welcome in the hillside by keeping fees down. What impact does he imagine that differential fee rates will have on local economies? Does he not think it premature to announce raising fees when we have not exited on exit day, we are likely to have a European election and we might not—I hope not—leave the EU at all?

Chris Skidmore: Again, we have made no announcement on raising any fees. The future decision on fee rates for EU students has yet to be made, as I stated in my opening remarks. The hon. Gentleman is right that setting tuition fees is a devolved matter. I work closely with devolved Ministers, and also make sure that we have a united approach in the United Kingdom to Welsh, Scottish and English university policy. However, I also totally respect the right of Welsh higher education policy makers to be able to look at different systems—for example, the Diamond review looked at access and part-time study.

We can learn a lot from each other in due course, and I have already been to Cardiff to meet the vice-chancellor Colin Riordan, who has raised research issues. Obviously,

[Chris Skidmore]

that is a UK-specific reserved matter, and I think it is important that we continue those dialogues, but I would say that no decisions have been made. We have provided the certainty on 2019-20, and an announcement on 2020-21 will be made shortly. Any future policies will be part of those future negotiations, which, if we can have the EU deal voted through by the House, we will be able to get on with.

Rape Victims: Disclosure of Evidence

4.33 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service whether he will make a statement on requests by the police for victims of rape to provide their mobile phone and other digital devices.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Mr Speaker—[*Interruption.*] Not now, mother.

There is widespread recognition that disclosure in criminal cases must be improved. As the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), whom I still call my friend, knows, disclosure of evidence is crucial for ensuring the public's confidence in the police and in our criminal justice system. It is important to note that police forces have been using forms to request victims' consent to review mobile phones in investigations, including sexual assault cases, for some time. What is new is the national form that was introduced today, which attempts to distil current best practice and to replace the individual versions being used by the 43 police forces, to ensure that there is consistency and clarity for complainants. That is the intention of the police.

In considering seeking such consent, the police must consider what is a reasonable line of inquiry and ensure that their approach avoids unnecessary intrusion into a complainant's personal life. In July 2018, the Director of Public Prosecutions issued advice on investigating communications evidence, making it clear that the examination of the mobile telephones of complainants should not be pursued as a matter of course and that, where it was pursued, the level of extraction should be proportionate.

This Government have made protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims and survivors of sexual violence a key priority, and it is encouraging that more victims than ever before have had the confidence to come forward. However, it is surely critical that victims are not deterred from seeking justice by a perception of how their personal information is handled. They can and should expect nothing less than that it will be dealt with in a way that is consistent with their right to privacy and with the interests of justice.

This is clearly a complex area, and while disclosure is an important component of the criminal justice system in ensuring a fair trial, the police have acknowledged that the use of personal data in criminal investigations is a source of anxiety. They will continue to work with victim groups and the Information Commissioner's Office to ensure that their approach to this issue strikes the necessary, if difficult, balance between the requirement for reasonable lines of inquiry and the victim's right to privacy. I can assure the House that the Government will continue to work with partners in the criminal justice system to deliver the recommendations in the Attorney General's review designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of disclosure.

Anna Soubry: I thank the Minister for his response. I have indeed read the document to which he refers. Rape is among the most serious and heinous of crimes, carrying a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Victims of all crimes frequently feel that they are treated more like the accused. For example, they are required to

provide fingerprints for the purposes of elimination and asked to give their consent for their medical records to be disclosed, and rape victims have to undergo intimate medical examinations after suffering the most appalling violations. However, it is the way in which we deal with these requests that is critical. What we must not do is issue a blanket demand for the handover of mobile phones and other digital devices and then threaten to discontinue a case if a victim, especially a rape victim, refuses to hand them over.

Will the Minister answer the following questions? Will he withdraw this document, because it is going to deter victims of rape in particular from coming forward? Will he ensure that there is no blanket request for rape victims—or, indeed, any other victims—to hand over phones and other digital devices? Instead, will he ensure that any request of victims—in particular, the victims of rape and other sexual offences—is made only if the investigation, including the account of the accused, has been properly looked at and it is the view of the investigating officer, having considered all the material, that such a request should be made? Will the Minister withdraw any document that states—and condemn all assertions—that cases will be dropped if the victim does not agree to hand over any material or device to the police? Does he agree that those threats are unacceptable?

Will the Minister confirm that it is already the practice of Crown Court judges to ask, at the plea and trial preparation hearing, whether all digital material has been obtained and preserved? Does he agree that if the existing law, guidance and practice directions on disclosure were followed, they would do justice to both the victim and the accused, and that their being followed properly by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service would ensure that further distress and threats to rape victims and other victims of crime would not be necessary?

Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions. She is of course absolutely right to describe rape as a heinous crime. She is also right to remind the House that there is nothing new about requesting personal, highly sensitive information from those alleging the crime. She is also absolutely right that that needs to be done with the utmost sensitivity. She may have a different perspective—views may differ around the House—but I believe that the police have made considerable improvements over recent years in that respect.

I have read the document, and the right hon. Lady has asked me to withdraw it. It is not my document, because the process is led by the police and the Crown Prosecution Service. What I can say to her, concerned as she is about the risk that the process might lead to those alleging rape not coming forward, is that an impact assessment has been carried out and we will take a strong interest in it. It is not a blanket request. As she knows, the police and the CPS proceed on a case-by-case basis. They have a heavy responsibility to pursue reasonable lines of inquiry and to make such a request only when they consider it relevant.

The right hon. Lady referred to the language in the document, and I think she asserted that the police were suggesting that if someone did not hand over their phone it would not be possible for the investigation or prosecution to continue. I may be misrepresenting her, but that is what I heard. Language is important, as she knows, and the document states:

“If you refuse permission for the police to investigate, or for the prosecution to disclose material which could enable the defendant to have a fair trial then it may not be possible for the investigation or prosecution to continue.”

I have discussed that with the police, and they see it as a reasonable statement of fact, but the language used is sensitive and can be discussed with the police and others to see how it may be improved.

My final point comes to the fundamental underlying issue. As the right hon. Lady and everyone in the House knows, we have had a long history of failure in relation to the disclosure system, which sits at the heart of our criminal justice system and public confidence and trust in it. There has to be a response, and the CPS and the police are working closer together than ever before on this. The national disclosure improvement plan, which is now in its second phase, is an extremely credible piece of work, and it fits with that work to try to rebuild confidence in our criminal justice system. She knows that there is a balance to be struck between pursuing reasonable lines of inquiry and protecting privacy, and I believe that the police, with the best of intentions, have tried to strike the right balance, but they are open to improving it if improvement is needed.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Many of us struggle to be away from our mobile phones for half an hour, let alone any longer, so can the Minister reassure me that the police will be sufficiently funded to take phones away from alleged victims for the shortest possible time and to interrogate them with the most up-to-date equipment?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is entirely right. We all know how attached we, our friends and our children are to the mobile phone. It plays a fundamental role in our lives, and the prospect of being detached from it is genuinely alarming. I can give that undertaking. The police are aware of the need to minimise the length of time that a phone is taken away from someone. At the heart of my hon. Friend's inquiry is a question about technology, the ability to process information quickly, the requirements of the criminal justice system and improvements to the disclosure process.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I commend the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for applying for it.

The latest Home Office figures show that the proportion of reported rapes reaching prosecution is now at 1.7%, which is an appalling statistic. The rate was at 1.9% in January, so clearly the situation is getting even worse. The Minister knows that the issue of disclosure in our criminal justice system has been a running sore for this Government, with hundreds of cases dropped on that basis, and it is not good enough.

The Minister must accept that the Government's cuts to resources, to the police and to the Crown Prosecution Service have restricted the capacity of those organisations to investigate and sift evidence. The Government need to get disclosure right. Of course we need relevant evidence to be disclosed in all cases, but there is a big difference between that and those who make a complaint of rape having to open up their entire digital life to be picked over.

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

We cannot have a situation in which complainants are asked to sign consent forms authorising the investigation of their data without limit, with the case not being taken forward if they refuse. I heard what the Minister said about the language on the form itself but if, in practice, that means, “Give us your mobile phone or the case will be dropped,” that is no way to run any criminal investigation and it will deter victims even further from coming forward.

Given the level of concern that has been expressed today, can the Minister confirm that all complainants will be entitled to fully funded, independent legal advice before they sign these consent forms? Can he at least make that pledge today? When are the Government going to accept that more resources are needed for our police and our whole criminal justice system? When will the Minister finally get this issue of disclosure right and stop failing victims?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman lets himself down by trying to make cheap political points on this issue, because we are talking about a very serious matter in our criminal justice system and its integrity. He and other Opposition Members know that the problem of disclosure has run for a very long time, going way back into the 1990s, and I would have hoped that there would be cross-party support for what is being done to make radical improvements to that process.

The hon. Gentleman will also know that one of the big game changers in recent decades has been the exponential growth in the volume of digital data and the challenge that that brings to the police. He continues to give the impression that what has been announced today is a new process, but the police have been taking and requesting access to mobile phones for some time. What today represents is a well-intentioned attempt by the police to bring together best practice in a national form so that there is consistent practice across the country and so that consent is as well informed as possible—that is the intention of this form.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): I was never a specialist in criminal law, but my time as a barrister taught me that, during litigation or prosecution, both sides come under an ongoing duty of disclosure. That is a vital principle of our justice system, made all the more important in this context where we have seen a number of rape and serious violence cases collapse upon the emergence of subsequent evidence. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what has been proposed is proportionate, reasonable and sensitive, and therefore is not anti-victim but pro-justice?

Mr Hurd: I believe so. We have to be clear that there is some risk, but there is also a counter-risk, to which my hon. Friend alludes, that continued disclosure failures would lead to more cases, such as that of Liam Allan and others, collapsing at the last moment, which is disastrous for everyone involved. No one should pretend it is easy, but we are very clear, and the House should be very clear, that we need to make material, rapid improvements to the disclosure processes, because they are the heart of the integrity of our criminal justice system.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I think everyone in the House wants to see justice done and the truth established through the investigation of all relevant evidence, but I hope we can also all agree that that cannot and does not justify a general trawl through the private life of any citizen. Investigations in pursuit of information must be evidence-led and targeted. That can involve, as the Minister said, a difficult balance, but the policy, as reported today, gets that balance totally wrong.

There is a world of difference between, on the one hand, seeking to establish whether a particular telephone call was made or a text was sent and, on the other hand, insisting on *carte blanche* to fish through whatever is on a phone. Has the Minister even assessed whether this policy can be justified under the European convention on human rights or data protection laws? More fundamentally, as Rape Crisis Scotland has argued today, is there not a huge danger that such a policy will put people off reporting rape and sexual violence? Just what measures are in place to protect the privacy of those to whom such requests have been made? Surely there must be a more proportionate and sensible way to support justice and protect privacy at the same time.

Mr Hurd: I have some sympathy with some of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. One very welcome bit of progress we have made as a society in recent years is in building the confidence and trust of victims of previously hidden crimes, be they domestic violence, sexual violence, rape or modern slavery, to come forward—frankly, I am damned if we are going to go backwards on that. I think the House is united on that. Of course there is some underlying risk, which we will monitor extremely carefully through the impact assessment, but I am serious about the counter-risk. If the police do not get consents and if we really do restrict access to mobile phones in this day and age, we will undermine the process of critical improvement in our disclosure process. As I said, the counter-risk is of cases continuing to collapse at the last minute, which is the worst possible outcome. I am sure that he and I would both wish to avoid it.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The victims of rape are not only those who have had this terrible crime done to them, but people who have been wrongly accused. A young friend of mine was wrongly accused of rape, making his life a misery for months and months; he was bursting into tears and all the rest of it because of the stress. Only through telephone evidence that emerged was it shown that his accuser had been sexting him—this was despite his denials; he had not seen this person for years. So may I just say to the Minister that he should say to the police that this is the right course of action? Of course it has to be proportionate, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) said, justice has to be done, and that includes for those people who have been accused of rape when in fact they are innocent.

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes an important point in an extremely impressive way. The whole House is united in wanting to see the country make more progress in prosecuting and convicting for rape in a more effective way, because, as the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) says, it is an absolutely heinous crime and there is huge space for us to improve. However, we have to be mindful, not least in the light of very recent

highly publicised cases, of the damage when things go wrong, as in the case of Liam Allan, where lives and personal lives are ruined as a result of failures in the disclosure system and cases collapse at the last minute. That is a terrible outcome for absolutely everyone. I impress on the House that underpinning this proposal is a desire of the police to improve the understanding of what they are requesting so that consent is better informed.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I call the Mother of the House, Harriet Harman.

Ms Harman: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I agree with the way this was put by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and I agree about just how serious the problem is. Let me tell the House about an email I received this morning from a young woman I know. I did not know she had been sexually assaulted. She said, “Six months ago, I was seriously sexually assaulted by a complete stranger. Two months after the assault, the police demanded full access to my phone, including my Facebook and Instagram passwords, my photos, stretching back to 2011, notes, texts, emails and the full history of 128 WhatsApp groups and individuals’ conversations stretching back over five years. I had no prior or subsequent contact with my attacker. I lie awake at night worrying about the details of private conversations with friends, boyfriends, business contacts, family that are now in the hands of the police. It is a gross intrusion into my privacy and theirs. I feel completely as if I am the one on trial.”

We all know, as the Minister has said, that disclosure is a problem, but we also know that there is massive under-reporting of rape cases. We also know that one of the problems in rape cases is that the victim is attacked in court and put on trial herself. The “Digital device extraction” document that has been issued today says quite simply, “Give us all your devices. We will download and review all the material, including deleted material, so that we can give it to the suspect and use it in the trial”. I know the Minister is committed to justice for victims as well as for defendants—I totally accept his good faith in this matter—so I implore him not to dig in and say that this is a good thing. There is a real problem out there that has been exposed, and he really needs to take action on it.

Mr Hurd: The Mother of the House is entirely right to state that a huge and complex raft of problems underlies this issue, and to point out that in the past there have been—but I hope not in future—failings in how the police used their powers and fulfilled their duties and responsibilities in this area. One thing from which I take encouragement is the police leadership’s candour in recognising that at the heart of this is a problem of culture in the police, and a need for them to take disclosure more seriously and not see it as an administrative bolt-on.

The guidance could not make it more explicit that complainants’ mobile telephones should not be examined as a matter of course, and that where they are, the level of extraction should be proportionate. The guidance makes that clear, and we expect the police to follow it. The Mother of the House makes good points about the

workings of the courts in this area, and that is a priority for both Ministers who flank me—the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins).

Mr Speaker: It is important that our proceedings are intelligible for all those observing them, so if there are people present who are unaware of the significance of the Mother of the House, it ought to be explained. The Mother of the House is the female Member with the longest uninterrupted service. In the case of the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), if memory serves me correctly that uninterrupted service dates back to 28 October 1982, so the Mother of the House has served in the House for 36 years, six months and one day. I just thought it was important to make that clear. Whether or not people think it was important to make it clear, I have made it clear, and that is the situation.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I am the mother on the Government Benches.

Mr Speaker: I am very happy to accept that that is indeed the case, but as the right hon. Lady does not wish to contribute at the moment, we will hold her in reserve. We will hear from her presently.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Rape is a heinous and horrible crime, and I have seen its consequences at first hand, so I am fully aware, so far as any man can be, of its impact on a woman. At the same time, there are also concerns that if a man is found guilty but is not, that man’s reputation is damaged for the rest of his life.

Knowing rape cases as I do, having been a journalist for some 17 years and having covered the courts, I know that it is common for the defence to attack a woman’s reputation. I would like to hear from the Minister what is to prevent that happening. If the police have all this evidence going back many years, as we have heard, what can be done to ensure that only the relevant information is selected? Who will choose what that relevant information is?

Mr Hurd: Underlying this issue are decisions around reasonable lines of inquiry and tests of relevance made by the police, the prosecution and, ultimately, a judge, so there are, as my hon. Friend knows, checks and balances in the system. I come back to my fundamental point: I urge the House not to lose sight of the context of this initiative from the police, which is their taking a further step to improve the understanding of what they are trying to do to balance the right to privacy with their duty to pursue reasonable lines of inquiry. That is the context of this debate.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Of course the police must have an effective disclosure regime. The Minister just referred to there being checks and balances in the system to prevent inquiries being inappropriate, but he will know that those checks and balances are already not working, and that they are not even embedded in this document. This document goes in the opposite direction. I urge him to read the form from the point of view of a rape victim

[Yvette Cooper]

who has just been through an awful ordeal. From their point of view, it looks as though they will have their phone taken away, potentially for several months; as though the police will be able to look into all corners of it and into every aspect of their life; as though any of that information could be given to the person who raped them; and as though there are no safeguards in place at all. It is pretty obvious that the form will deter people from coming forward and pursuing cases concerning these awful crimes with the police. Surely, in the interests of justice for women who are victims of awful crimes, the Minister should pull this document back and get the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to rewrite it.

Mr Hurd: Coming as it does from the Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, that message will be heard loud and clear by both the police and the CPS. I think that this is an honest attempt by the police to pull together best practice from across a very fragmented system, in which these forms look different in different places in the country, which is wrong. It tries to pull together something that is more consistent, and that tries to inform complainants in a better way about what may or may not happen with their phone, and the consequences of that.

I have spoken to the police about this, because the Government are extremely sensitive to any risk of compounding people's stress or trauma in this situation. The police have assured me that they have worked closely with victim groups and others on this document, and they are absolutely open to continuing to work with groups to improve it if there is a clear feeling that it needs to be improved. I will certainly take that up with them in the light of this urgent question.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Has the Minister given any thought to whether there is a need for independent authorisation as another safeguard, given that such an invasion of a woman's privacy will be undertaken through this form?

Mr Hurd: I respect where that point comes from and the underlying sentiments, but I come back to my point: we are not talking about something new in police processes or the fulfilment of their duties on disclosure. We are talking about a new, national form to replace many different versions across the country. In a way, this is an evolution of an existing process—a difficult one—whereby victims of rape or victims alleging rape are already exposed to the need to answer some difficult and sensitive questions. This situation already exists; the form is, I think, an honest attempt to try to inform that consent in a better way.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Many years ago, I worked for the police in a criminal justice capacity. My role included supporting the victims of sexual offences, including rape. The brave survivors are scarred, both emotionally and physically, and sometimes they develop a distrust of the justice system. That has been aggravated by a number of high-profile trials in which the victim, whether they be male or female, has been accused by the defence barrister of being promiscuous—as though they were almost asking to be attacked. In the light of that, and of the fact that we have such a low prosecution rate

for rape, does the Minister think that this action will hinder or encourage victims of rape and other sexual offences to come forward?

Mr Hurd: I have great respect for the hon. Lady's experience in this area, and I totally accept what she is saying about the lack of trust out there. I am happy to be corrected on this, but I genuinely think that this country—I am not making any political point here—has made great progress in recent decades in trying to encourage victims of previously hidden crime to come forward. That makes it all the more important that we get this right.

Yes, the volume of rape prosecutions has fallen. That is a concern to us, which is why we are doing a root and branch review of criminal justice processes in relation to rape. However, the number of prosecutions for sexual offences is at the highest volume ever recorded. I come back to my main point, which is that this is not a new process; it is a new form, which the police are open to improving if there is a strong view that it needs to be improved. The motivation behind the form is to try to ensure that consent to handing over mobile phones is better informed. This process is currently done differently across the country, which does need to be remedied.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The charity that I ran the London marathon for this weekend—Barnsley Sexual Abuse and Rape Crisis Services—sees at first hand the trauma faced by survivors of rape, and I thank everyone who sponsored me to support its vital work. In South Yorkshire, 50 out of 1,400 reported rapes over the past year resulted in a charge; that is just 3.5%. This is completely unacceptable. Let me ask the Minister again: does he honestly believe that survivors of rape giving up their privacy is the solution to addressing these shocking statistics?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her success in the marathon, and on fundraising for a very valuable charity. She is right that the volume of rape prosecutions has fallen. I have spoken to that; it is a concern for us. However, I ask her to respect the point that I am trying to make, which is that the police are already in the business of asking people for their mobile phones, because we all understand that there are things on mobile phones these days that could be incredibly important and relevant to their investigations. This process happens already, and it is because of the recognition of the difficulty around it that the police are trying to improve the system across the country through this national form. Now, it may be a good form or a bad form, and the police are open to improving it if it can be improved, but that is the motivation. I would guard against Members trying to tie this matter in with other issues, however important.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Minister define what he regards as “reasonable”? The point has already been made clearly that there may be many areas of a victim's life that it is not reasonable for the victim to disclose to the accused, the police or the investigating authorities. I want to know exactly what rights the victim has to refuse to give information, and what impact that would have on any potential case.

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Gentleman, with his experience as a Minister, knows that what represents a reasonable line of inquiry is an investigative matter for the police,

and that although the prosecution will do what they can to assist in identifying potential further inquiries, those suggestions will not be taken by the police as definitive or exhaustive. The right hon. Gentleman talks about compulsion; he will know that we are talking about a form that asks for consent. Consent is not, by definition, compulsory.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In September last year, the Government published, with great fanfare, the victims strategy, but it is very hard to believe that those who wrote the document published today have read the Government's own policy for victims. Given the huge number of women and men who have experienced sexual violence and are not reporting it—according to the Office for National Statistics, 87% of people suffering sexual violence do not report it—is it not vital that we ensure that nothing is done to prevent people from coming forward, that this document is reviewed, and that the Minister takes personal responsibility for ensuring that it is reviewed in the light of the Government's strategy and what the House has said clearly today?

Mr Hurd: The right hon. Gentleman has served in the Government, so he knows that we sometimes have to wrestle with difficult balances. There is an extremely difficult balance to be struck between supporting the police in fulfilling their duty to follow all reasonable lines of inquiry, and our common desire to do everything we can to respect individuals' privacy.

I come back to the heart of what the police are trying to do. This is not a new process. They are now in the business of gathering evidence from mobile phones. People are handing over phones, however difficult that is. This is an honest attempt to try to bring greater consistency and better information into the system, to try to help potential victims of rape understand the process better. I am absolutely sure that that is the intention. Whether it is being executed in the best way is clearly something on which this House has different views. Having spoken to the police, I am absolutely sure that they will be listening to this carefully. They are genuinely open to discussing with all interested parties how this can be improved. We have to get this difficult balance right.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On 11 April, I asked the Solicitor General whether there will be meaningful guidance for the police

and the CPS about the use and trawling of individuals' digital data. From this form, it does not look as though that has been taken on board. It feels as though the process for disclosure is about the character and credibility of the victim, not the perpetrator who is on trial. Will the Minister rewrite the guidance? Will he set out how long a victim should prepare for not having their phone; whether a timescale could be set; and, importantly, whether the police will be transparent about what data has been copied over when the phone is returned?

Mr Hurd: The requirement on the police in relation to transparency already exists. On the guidance, again, I make it clear to the hon. Gentleman and to the House that the Director of Public Prosecutions' advice on investigating communications data makes it clear that the examination of complainants' mobile telephones should not be pursued as a matter of course, and that where it is pursued, the level of extraction should be proportionate. That is the guidance that both the police and the CPS understand, respect, and are implementing.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): Of course there has to be disclosure relevant to the defence—nobody would dispute that—but this is about the question of what is relevant, especially when, as the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) said, an alleged assailant is a complete stranger. The impact of this full disclosure requirement, and the headlines in the newspapers, was truly atrocious. Potential victims of sexual assault or rape will have seen some of those headlines, whether it be "Digital strip-search" or "Hand over your phone now". This is nothing short of a public relations disaster in our criminal justice system. The Minister really should take up the opportunity to review this document and correct that; otherwise fewer people will come forward and report crimes.

Mr Hurd: I certainly do not want that outcome, and neither does anyone else in this House. That would be a retrograde step. My instinct is to check the facts and look at the impact assessment, but if the mood of the House is that this document is not right, then I will certainly take that up with the police and the CPS. The hon. Gentleman knows that what is a reasonable line of inquiry is an investigative matter for the police and the CPS. On the definition of "relevant", I am not a lawyer—the Chamber is probably bristling with lawyers—but there are many years of case study to help us to understand that point.

HS2: Buckinghamshire

5.12 pm

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will make a statement on the proposals from Buckinghamshire County Council requesting that all enabling work for HS2 in Buckinghamshire is paused until notice to proceed to the main works contractors has been approved.

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently point out at this stage that the question is narrowly about Buckinghamshire; it is not the occasion for a general debate about HS2. I will consider the Minister's reply in making a judgment about whether it has been broadened, but at this point it is narrow.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Completing HS2 is Government policy and is crucial to unlocking economic growth and improved productivity in the midlands and north. It is supported by Members on both sides of this House. I therefore have no intention of halting work on HS2 in Buckinghamshire or elsewhere. There are already 7,000 people and 2,000 businesses working to deliver the HS2 project, and early works are well under way. Once HS2 Ltd has reached agreement with its suppliers and the Government are satisfied about both affordability and value for money, we will make a full business case for phase 1. This will inform notice to proceed, which is the formal contractual process that enables each phase 1 supplier to move from design and development to construction. Notice to proceed is scheduled to take place later this year. The works that are now taking place are necessary to enable the construction of HS2 to move forward in accordance with the programme, following notice to proceed.

We are aiming for HS2 to be one of the most environmentally responsible infrastructure projects ever delivered in the UK, and managing its impact on the environment during construction is a high priority. HS2 will deliver a new green corridor made up of more than 650 hectares of new woodland, wetland and wildlife habitats alongside the line. More than 7 million new native trees and shrubs will be planted, to help blend the line into the landscape and leave a lasting legacy of high-quality green spaces all along the route. It will include more than 33 sq km of new and existing wildlife habitat—an increase of around 30%, compared with what is there now. Many of the early works that are now taking place on HS2 are activities aimed precisely at creating this environmental legacy. They are being done now to ensure that they become fully established as early as possible, alongside construction of the railway.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: The notice to proceed for HS2 has again been delayed, I believe until December. In the meantime, enabling works continue to blight large parts of the county, and this error-ridden project is costing our local authorities more and more. The situation is critical, with the area of outstanding natural beauty suffering irreparable environmental damage from preparatory works, rather than the “legacy” the Minister just referred to, and the costs spiralling out of control, when this project could well be cancelled. Indeed, millions

are being spent on consultants to try to reduce the costs, which will in all likelihood result in failure to deliver on environmental protections and promises.

Already hedgerows have been netted or removed, machinery has been brought in to remove mature oak trees, country road verges have been destroyed by HGVs, massive ugly earthworks have appeared at our prime tourist sites, construction worker camps are surrounded by prison-like barriers, and there is the horror of the depopulated areas where homeowners were forced to sell to HS2.

It is almost impossible to hold this monster to account. Written questions are answered so poorly that I have to submit freedom of information requests to elicit basic information. I want some straight answers today. Why is only a junior Minister with other responsibilities in charge of the largest infrastructure project in Europe, which costs more than Brexit? Surely it should have its own Minister, if not its own Department. In her written answer today and in her statement just now, the Minister gives the impression that the entire decision on the go-ahead of this project comes from her. Will she be the sole Minister responsible for issuing the notice to proceed?

Why has the cost of HS2 not been updated since 2015, and what are the actual costs at today's prices? What is the latest evaluation of the cost-benefit analysis, and why has that not been done already? When will the Treasury review be completed, and will a full report be published? Is the delivery of HS2 still being flagged with an amber-red warning, and how regularly is Cabinet updated on this project? Has HS2 applied for and received all the environmental licences and permissions required to carry out this environmental vandalism in Buckinghamshire?

What level of control and monitoring does the Secretary of State exercise over the awarding of contracts and the finances, and if he does have a level of control, why has £1.7 million that was paid out in unauthorised redundancy payments not been recovered or any director held to account? What would it cost to cancel the project now? Why, with so many doubts and unanswered questions, will the Government not agree to a perfectly reasonable request from Bucks County Council to have a six-month pause to do a total re-evaluation of this project, which has already blown its timetable and its budget before it even has the go-ahead?

Mr Speaker: The Minister's use of the words “along the route” in her initial reply has somewhat widened the scope, which is no doubt music to the ears of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and, to judge by his grinning countenance, the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax).

Ms Ghani: My right hon. Friend has posed a number of questions, which I will do my best to get through. She has expressed her disappointment that I am not the Secretary of State, but I am indeed the Minister responsible for this project. Not only is the project this Government's policy, but it was in the Conservative party's manifesto as well as in the Labour party's manifesto. It is absolutely right that the Minister responsible for the project continues to undertake to ensure that it stays on track.

This is a good opportunity to remind the House why HS2 is so important. It is indeed a national project, and it is the largest infrastructure project in Europe. It will

connect eight of our 10 biggest cities, connecting half of our country's population, so every Member of Parliament in this place will have constituents who are positively impacted by HS2. It will create thousands of jobs directly and over 100,000 jobs indirectly, and the net positive for our economy will be well beyond £94 billion over its lifetime.

We always talk about investment in our rail network and why we need to have extra capacity when it comes to HS2, but demand on the west coast line has increased by 190% since 1995 and we are close to being unable to add any more seats or trains. People often stand the whole way on long-distance journeys, and while delays are less frequent than in the past, we need a solution, and HS2 provides that solution. It is supported by a number of leaders up and down the country, but particularly in the midlands and the north, who often comment not only to the media but to me that they are quite fed up about people in the south commenting on what is needed in the north.

My right hon. Friend wanted to know about the notice to proceed. The notice to proceed is the point when HS2 Ltd instructs its main works civil contractors to begin construction of the phase 1 railway, as set out in the HS2 development agreement, which was in the Bill that went through in 2017.

My right hon. Friend talked about the impacts on Buckinghamshire, and she has been a very passionate campaigner for her constituency. I understand that her constituents will be feeling some of the impacts of HS2's construction, but the enabling works are absolutely crucial, especially when it comes to the environment. The early works are necessary to enable the construction of HS2 to proceed in accordance with the programme once notice to proceed is given. The existing programme of enabling works includes habitat creation, tree planting, ground investigation, the construction of work compounds, road improvements and utility diversions. This existing programme of enabling works has not changed, and it is the backbone of ensuring that further environmental mitigation can take place, which is why enabling works are so crucial. My right hon. Friend will know, because we have often talked about this, that HS2 is seeking to achieve no net loss in biodiversity across the route of the new railway.

My right hon. Friend also talked about the particular impacts in her constituency, and she has been a staunch campaigner on behalf of Buckinghamshire, which we know will be impacted by the line. A large section of the subsurface route, in the form of the 24 km Chilterns tunnel, has already been put through the hybrid Select Committee process. Furthermore, £3 million has been provided for the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty, and there are the £5 million woodland fund, the £30 million road safety fund and the £40 million community and environment and business and local economy funds. Buckinghamshire has already received over 30% of all the awards it could be afforded.

HS2 is a large infrastructure project—there is no denying that—but it is absolutely vital if we are to focus on smashing the north-south divide and provide opportunities for people who live beyond London and the south-east. It is and will be the most important economic regeneration project for a generation, and it is absolutely right that parliamentarians commit to long-term infrastructure projects that reflect the needs of our country.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The last three years of political turbulence should have taught the Government that politics has to change. The diktats from Westminster must be replaced by co-production with communities, listening to what they are saying. It is unbelievable that, yet again, the Secretary of State has failed to make it to the Dispatch Box.

Week by week, we hear of the spiralling costs of HS2, and in a week when Labour is declaring a national climate emergency, it is clear that the full carbon and environmental cost of HS2 will be deeply damaging across Buckinghamshire, not least to the irreplaceable Chilterns, if the connectivity, route and infrastructure are not refocused. It is not the concept of the project that is wrong, as urgent capacity is needed to secure a significant modal shift from cars and HGVs to passenger and freight lines, but the governance of HS2 must be overhauled and fully integrated into the network enhancements programme. Labour aspires to high speed rail, which has to have a focus on interconnectivity to facilitate investment and economic growth in the northern cities and to compete with the internal flight market, thus becoming a sustainable alternative. However, the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) is right to scrutinise the Secretary of State's handling of the project.

Why is the Minister proceeding before a full business case, the skills capability and the real cost have received further scrutiny in the light of evidence that these measures have changed? What discussions has she had with the National Audit Office and the Transport Committee over the widely held concerns expressed over HS2 costs and environmental impact? Does the Minister believe, as has been argued by the Tory leader of Buckinghamshire County Council, that ultra-fast broadband replaces ultra-fast rail? That certainly shows a lack of understanding in the Minister's party of the transport and economic needs of the north. Finally, will the Minister revisit the route plans to ensure that connectivity opportunities are maximised by this project?

Ms Ghani: Given how much playing of politics there was in that statement, one could forget that the Labour party actually supports HS2. In his "game changer" speech, the shadow Secretary of State for Transport spoke about its importance.

Before I go on to answer questions, we must remind ourselves that it is absolutely right that we do not focus only on what is required here in London and the south-east. In case they need reminding, I will tell shadow Front Benchers what Andy Burnham said recently:

"We don't need London commentators telling northern leaders what we need... We need HS2".

He—[*Interruption.*] If Opposition Front Benchers support northern Labour leaders, some support at the Dispatch Box, and when other opportunities arise, for the most important infrastructure project of our lifetimes is absolutely key.

I remind the House that Judith Blake, leader of Leeds City Council, said that HS2 is

"the opportunity to transform the prospects for the north—perhaps a once in 200-year opportunity."

I know you take a close personal interest in HS2, given your constituency, Mr Speaker. You may be aware that the all-party parliamentary group on the northern

[Ms Ghani]

powerhouse, which includes more than 80 MPs, recently put out a statement about how important HS2 is to ensure that we smash the north-south divide.

When there are criticisms of HS2 and constituents' queries are not dealt with, it is absolutely right that we hold HS2 to account. Some individuals have to deal with the difficult impact of the line going near their homes. I am challenging HS2 repeatedly and will continue to do so. If any hon. Members have cases that have fallen short, I apologise, and I will be more than happy to hold further meetings.

As I mentioned earlier, this is one of our largest infrastructure projects and it will connect half of our country's population. To adapt the motto of the Labour party, this line is for the many and not for the vested interests of the few who want to play politics with this important infrastructure project.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I am mindful of your own constituency, Mr Speaker, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) on her submissions just now. I simply want to ask the Minister this question. Does she think that this monstrous waste of money, which gives no benefit whatever to my constituents in Staffordshire, has been justified? Secondly, has she read the report commissioned by Mr Trevor Parkin and other constituents of mine, and written by Mr Michael Byng? It has completely exposed the unutterable waste of money that the project represents. Will she please take note of these representations and do what I understand some members of the Cabinet are doing? They are saying that they have had enough of the project.

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend has worked tremendously hard on behalf of his constituency, and I think him for his question. He has been disappointed by some of the behaviour of HS2 Ltd and by the fact that some of his representations have not been favoured. I recognise all his work to represent his constituency, but unfortunately I do not agree with him. This project is incredibly important for the future of our country.

We cannot lament that we do not build long-term infrastructure projects or invest in our country for future growth, while at the same time not having confidence in vital projects such as HS2. It is not about decreasing journeys, even though that is absolutely key, but about bringing communities together, spreading wealth and job opportunities, and increasing capacity for both freight and people. We do not want everyone to assume that once they have finished their apprenticeship or job they have to get to London and the south-east to secure work. We need to ensure that companies move out of London and the south-east to Birmingham and other points on the line. That will create opportunities for everyone along this route.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Does the Minister understand that there is real frustration in towns across the country that the Government are putting billions of pounds into an ever-escalating budget for a rail project to connect cities, while at the same time huge numbers of towns, including in my constituency, have rubbish train connections and cannot

even get investment for the additional carriages we need, never mind rail route upgrades? Will she undertake to provide a breakdown from her Department of the amount of capital rail funding going into projects for cities and the amount of money going into projects for towns?

Ms Ghani: I am more than happy to put together a note to put on paper the amount of investment we are making in our rail infrastructure in the north. There is one budget for HS2, and we are sticking to it.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I have sympathy for the Minister as a junior Minister being handed what looks increasingly like a poisoned chalice. I am also sympathetic to the fact that we cannot have an infrastructure project without environmental consequences. But does the Minister not understand that there is mounting disquiet about two things that are linked? First, the conduct of this project by HS2 is a shambles. It is particularly shambolic in its relations with local communities and in the fact that it takes a cavalier approach to any sort of engagement, including in closing down a nature reserve on the edge of my constituency and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) without any warning or notice at all.

Meanwhile, the costs escalate. I ask the question that my hon. Friend did not answer: is HS2 still being flagged as an amber-red warning? All the evidence suggests that the cost-benefit analysis is just not there. If that is the case, that should be of great concern across the House. My hon. Friend says we should keep politics out of it, but, forgive me, this is actually what politics is about: our collectively in this House paying some attention to whether public funds are being properly spent or not.

Ms Ghani: I have not been mansplained to at the Dispatch Box before, but here we are. I am indeed the Minister responsible for this project, and I was passionate about HS2 before I was given the portfolio. I may be a Member of Parliament for the south-east, but I grew up in Birmingham and HS2 just cannot come fast enough for us in the midlands. I do not know what to say to my right hon. and learned Friend about his comments. There is only one budget for HS2, and we will ensure that we can stick to that budget. That is why it is so important to get the business case together: not only to ensure that the costs are covered, but so that we can assess the positives it will bring to our economy. As I mentioned, the notice to proceed will be made public later in the year.

I understand my right hon. and learned Friend's frustration about some of the conduct by HS2 Ltd and any upset it may have done to his community. Since I have been Minister, I have insisted on an increase in community engagement managers and that they are appropriately embedded in their community. When cases are brought to my attention, I challenge HS2. We also have a residents' commissioner to undertake any concerns. It is unfortunate when a project this large is undermined by the behaviour of a few who do not appropriately manage relationships locally. As I said, when it has an impact on a Member's constituency it is difficult for them to see the greater good it will do not only for that area but for the rest of the country.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), I have opposed HS2 from its inception; I recognise that she has been a sturdy fighter against it. I notice that the Minister has not answered questions on the total cost. She talks about the midlands benefiting from HS2, but Coventry will certainly not, because it will bypass Coventry. She says it will be a vehicle for ordinary people, but we do not actually know the train fares yet. Train fares on the west coast main line are very expensive to ordinary members of the public.

Ms Ghani: The train fares will be assessed and brought forward at the most appropriate time. We want this line to be accessible to everybody, and because thousands of people will travel on the line, we have to ensure that the fares are appropriate, as they will be. This line will be incredibly important, including to the midlands. I held a series of roundtables for midlands chambers of commerce, with one recently saying that it would be appalling if HS2

“were used as a political football...It is a key piece of national infrastructure at a time when we need to be showing something positive to the world.”

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): HS2 is a white elephant that grows ever larger on huge amounts of taxpayers' cash. Back in 2013, when the project was unveiled, I predicted to the then Secretary of State that its cost would spiral to £100 billion, and he laughed. He was quite right to laugh, because if it is completed it will clearly cost far more than £100 billion. Does the Minister agree that the best thing to do is to scrap this project, lifting the blight from the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who live along the route, and split the original budget between link improvements in the midlands and the north, such as reopening the Ivanhoe line in north-west Leicestershire?

Ms Ghani: HS2 has one budget: £55.7 billion. Constant speculation around the budget undermines confidence in a project that we should be proud of, considering the positive impact it will have on our communities. Tickets will be on sale several years from now, when the line is up and running. I do not doubt that, when the line is up and running, nobody will talk about this moment right here and now when every element of the project is being constantly undermined. It is not a white elephant. It is creating capacity, reducing journey times, creating jobs and increasing productivity. It is a project that we should be proud of.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Government need a clearly funded plan for HS2, to make sure that it benefits communities in the north, rather than disadvantaging them. When will the Government accept that, without infrastructure investment on the east coast main line, the HS2 project's second phase risks exacerbating the current capacity constraint and low speeds by increasing the number of trains on this already stretched line? Will the Government confirm when the east coast main line will receive investment, to make sure that it is ready for HS2? That could have the intended benefit of bringing together the north and the south, rather than making the north further away.

Ms Ghani: This project is to bring together north and south and east and west; we cannot have HS3, or any other name that they want to give an east-west line, without HS2. There is only one budget—£55.7 billion. The Minister with responsibility for trains has said that there is substantial investment in the east coast main line. The hon. Lady talked about wanting to increase capacity, and that is exactly what HS2 will do.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, our constituents also feel that they are being trampled under the great white elephant of HS2. My question relates to the difficulty I have in getting straight answers out of HS2 Ltd. I had a meeting in my office on 1 April in which I am afraid I was slightly bad-tempered, which is not my normal manner; I apologised, but this gets right under our skin. I have had no follow-up from that meeting, although I was promised real information. I echo the calls of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan), because we need to pause this project while we get answers to important environmental questions.

Ms Ghani: If my hon. Friend was indeed enraged, all I can say is it will have been a very good meeting. I am sure HS2 will be listening to our exchanges. I know that a meeting took place on 1 April. I had hoped it would be productive. If it has not been, I will hold a meeting with her and work out what we can do to take this matter forward. She has some challenging cases to deal with and has made really good representations to me and HS2 Ltd. It is because this project will have an impact on the environment that we are doing everything we can to mitigate it, from planting over 7 million trees to ensuring no net loss in biodiversity, which are all things she is passionate about.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Dame Cheryl Gillan) for securing this urgent question. I have had a conversation with her and the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) about this project. We have seen significant cost overruns with Crossrail, so there isn't one budget, is there? There is a significant over-budget. If the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who I would say is the finance director of the project, says we should probably cancel it, perhaps we should be listening—unless, of course, that is about her ambitions in the forthcoming Conservative party leadership contest. Tomorrow, I have a meeting with the managing director of Chiltern Railways, who suggests we should consider increasing capacity on existing track and additional track on the existing line. Would that not be a better use of the budget?

Ms Ghani: I am not sure who in the Treasury the hon. Gentleman was referring to, but I remind him that HS2 is a key priority of the Government and a manifesto commitment of the Conservative party, as it is of the Labour party. We are in peculiar political times, and I do not want to see one of the most important infrastructure projects of our lifetime being kicked around like a football. It is a long-term project, and it is important that we stay committed to it and ensure it remains on budget and on track. He mentioned a meeting with Chiltern Railways. I have just been reminded by my hon. Friend the Rail Minister that over £48 billion will be spent in control period 6.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Minister spoke in her opening remarks about the economic benefits to the midlands and the north, and it is because of those benefits that I have up until now supported HS2, but she will realise that benefits in 15-plus years' time are a hard sell to passengers whose daily commute is being blighted. Would she consider rescheduling a project that is almost certainly going to overrun anyway and releasing some additional funding in the immediate future to improve local services and boost the economy of the north by, for example, providing additional freight capacity between the Humber ports and the west coast ports?

Ms Ghani: We are committed to funding railways in the north. My hon. Friend mentions investment around the ports, and he will see the work I have undertaken with Maritime 2050 to encourage investment in infrastructure and research and evaluation around maritime that will benefit his community. He makes a valid point. The project has taken a long time to get to this point—never mind the first scheduled trains—and as a long-term project it requires solid commitment from Ministers and Members of Parliament. If we are ever to undertake programmes of work that are truly transformative and long-term, we will have to show commitment over a long period. If £94 billion is returned to the economy and 100,000 jobs are created, it will play some part in regeneration in his community as well.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I have always supported this project—it will come through my constituency, but the benefits to my constituency will be huge in terms of jobs created, the rolling stock depot and various other aspects—but there is a problem. We were supposed to vote on phase 2b of the route in 2019, but that has been pushed back and back. My constituents near to the route are getting no answers or timeline and are having to battle tooth and nail to get compensation from HS2. I urge my hon. Friend to tell HS2 that its community engagement does not do what it says on the tin. I have met HS2 several times and pointed out areas of the route that need improvement, and every time I have another meeting, it is like the last one never happened. More importantly, in meetings with my constituents, it is also like the last one never happened.

There are two problems that I think my hon. Friend needs to address. First, the time overrun is costing money, and secondly, the engagement with my constituents is not working properly. Can we learn the lessons from

what is going on with phase 1—I hope that that keeps me in order, Mr Speaker—to ensure that we do not go through this process again when we reach phase 2?

Ms Ghani: I absolutely take on board my hon. Friend's frustration. He has already made a number of representations to me and to the Secretary of State. HS2 Ltd must get better. I am hearing that at the Dispatch Box, and HS2 will be hearing it too. HS2 must improve its community engagement: it must ensure that the community engagement managers are working effectively and in a timely fashion, and ensure that answers are given to the questions that are being posed. I do not think it is fair that Members of Parliament are having to make representations on behalf of their constituents. HS2 should be sorting out the issues so that they do not even reach MPs' surgeries, and I shall be taking that back to it as well.

I know that my hon. Friend—a bit like me—wants the line to come as soon as possible, but there was a slight delay to ensure that we were considering Northern Powerhouse Rail. He may remember that there was also an election, which took up a substantial amount of time.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): If I recall correctly, HS2 was an unaffordable electoral carrot offered by Mr Blair and, I believe, Lord Adonis initially. It is regrettable that the Conservative party has taken it up, because it is unaffordable. May I suggest that the money that we have would be better spent first on upgrading the lines that we have, and then, if necessary, on expanding capacity by putting down new lines next to the existing ones, thereby reducing the impact on the countryside et al? In particular, of course, we would like a bit more money to be spent down in Dorset, please.

Ms Ghani: I feel slightly nervous about answering my hon. Friend's question, because I have failed to turn up at a number of events in his constituency, and I am worried about the reception that I shall have at my next meeting there.

Let me remind my hon. Friend that investment in the lines in his area is already taking place. This is not an either/or project: we need to continue to invest in our traditional rail network. He referred to events in the past. I was not here at that time, but my job as a Minister is to ensure that we make the right decisions for the future. The impact that this project will have on our communities and on growth means that it is a very good project for us to support.

Northern Ireland: Political Process

5.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about the political process in Northern Ireland.

Last week, I came to the House and delivered a statement in the aftermath of the sickening attack that led to the death of Lyra McKee. The following day, both the Prime Minister and I attended her funeral at St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast, along with political leaders from across Northern Ireland and Ireland and from across the House. As many Members will know, it was an incredibly emotional and touching event, where I heard moving and powerful testimonies from Lyra's family and members of the community.

That was a day on which to grieve, and a day on which to reflect on a brilliant young life that was cut down by terrorism. All of us heard a clear message that day, from inside the cathedral, from the powerful testimony of Father Martin Magill, from the streets of Creggan and Londonderry, and from Northern Ireland's political leaders: no more violence, no more division, and no more delay. Northern Ireland's political leaders must come together now. They must work together to stand firm against those who oppose peace and the political process, and work to build a genuinely shared future for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Lyra symbolised the new Northern Ireland, and her tragic death cannot be in vain. All of us must take inspiration from what she achieved in her life, and work even harder to make Northern Ireland a brighter, more peaceful and prosperous place for everyone. As Secretary of State, I have always made it clear that my absolute priority is to see the restoration of all the political institutions established by the Belfast agreement. That agreement has formed the bedrock of peace and progress in Northern Ireland since it was reached just over 21 years ago. It must be upheld, and it must be defended from those who would seek to undermine it.

Northern Ireland needs its political leaders to stand together and work with each other, now more than ever. That is why, in Belfast last Friday, I, together with the Tanaiste, called formal political talks to restore the Executive, commencing on 7 May. Those talks will involve the UK Government, the five Northern Ireland political parties that are eligible to form an Executive, and the Irish Government, on matters for which they have responsibilities. The talks will be conducted in full accordance with the Belfast agreement and the well established three-stranded approach to which this Government remain committed. There will also be a meeting of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference on 8 May.

There is much to do, and many challenges ahead. It is incumbent on all of us to do all that we can to make these talks a success. Northern Ireland needs its Government back up and delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. From now until the start of talks, my team and I will be working with the parties on an intensive period of preparation for those talks. Both the UK and Irish Governments have been clear that we will do everything in our power to make these talks a success, but we cannot do it alone. No Government can impose an agreement from the outside. We need Northern Ireland's political leadership to do everything they can to ensure

that we emerge with an agreement to restore the Executive and build a better future for the people of Northern Ireland. We have a narrow window in which genuine progress can be made and we must act now.

I hope all Members of this House will appreciate that, to give these talks the best chance of success, there is a responsibility on all of us to give parties some time and some space to talk. While I will of course seek to keep this House updated, I will not provide a running commentary on negotiations. What I will be doing is everything I can to give these talks the best possible chance of success. I know all of us in this House and in the other place want to see these talks succeed.

This week has been a difficult time for us all. The murder of Lyra McKee was an attack not just on Lyra or our police service; it was an attack on all of us. Since that sickening attack in Derry, Northern Ireland's political leaders have shown great leadership in standing up together to reject violence, but it is now time for us to go further. The best possible way of showing those who oppose peace and democracy is to show that their efforts are futile and for all the political institutions of the Belfast agreement to be fully restored and functioning, as was intended by those who reached that historic agreement 21 years ago.

The stability and safety provided by the agreement have allowed Northern Ireland to thrive. Northern Ireland is now a leading destination for inward investment. Unemployment is at a record low and employment at a record high. Northern Ireland needs a devolved Government to allow for local decision making, to continue to strengthen the economy and to build a united and prosperous community. I will be doing all I can to make that happen, and I commend this statement to the House.

5.53 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): In thanking the Secretary of State for advance notice of the statement, may I also firmly welcome the spirit of that statement? She finished by talking about the things that are happening very positively in Northern Ireland, and she is right to do that. The tragedy of Lyra McKee's murder is that, once again, Northern Ireland is in the news globally for tragedy, not for the things that we want to hear.

Father Martin Magill commended political leaders for standing together in the Creggan on Good Friday, but he went on to say these words, which echoed around the world:

"Why in God's name does it take the death of a 29-year-old woman with her whole life in front of her to get us to this point?" Those words echoed around the world; they struck a very strong chord. We must recognise that they struck a strong chord not simply with the congregation in St Anne's cathedral, but with people across Northern Ireland. We have to recognise that the politics of relying on the shrinking and narrow base for different political parties in Northern Ireland will lead, and has led, nowhere.

What united the congregation in St Anne's was the common understanding of the outrage of Lyra McKee's murder, and the hope that something better had to emerge from that process. Father Magill quoted one of Lyra's friends, telling us that she or he—I am not sure—said of the younger generation:

"They need jobs... They need a life, not a gun put in their hands."

[Tony Lloyd]

So let us work together to take away the temptation of the gun and replace it with education, training and those very jobs which can transform people's lives. That is the stark challenge—the Secretary of State is right—to the Northern Ireland political parties, and, in particular, I have to say, to the leaders of the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin. They have to choose: do they want the politics of division or will they build the politics of unity of purpose and the politics of change?

Let me also turn to the position of the Governments in London and in Dublin. It was genuinely good to see the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in Belfast last week. It was good to see the Secretary of State herself and the Tanaiste. It is good that the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference, which was, frankly, so long in abeyance or even abandoned, has now met a couple of times—the Secretary of State announced today its next meeting—but nobody believes that either Government have been sufficiently engaged or energetic in the search for the return of Stormont government. That has now to change. Each Government have to be seized with the import of Northern Ireland and the need for power sharing.

I also have to say to the Secretary of State something I have raised with her before: we have not seen the Prime Minister engaged in this process, and cynics in Northern Ireland—this is important—say to me that Downing Street's main interest in Northern Ireland has been the 10 votes of the DUP Members of Parliament in this House and that, sadly, that prejudices the way that the Secretary of State's own efforts are seen. That, again, has to change, because the two Governments have to be seen to be both independent and impartial. That is why I have said in the past to the Secretary of State that the consideration of an independent chair might still have to be on the table.

Every Opposition Member of Parliament—I know I speak for them all, in Wales, in Scotland and in England—will support the Secretary of State in bringing these talks to a legitimate conclusion. I commit the Labour party and myself to working with her, where that is appropriate, to bring about that end, but I have to add a note of caution: yes, we want to see the Stormont Executive and the Stormont Assembly back in operation, but that is not enough. Any vision—there are conflicting visions, I know, of the medium and long-term future of Northern Ireland—must have power sharing and devolved government at its core. We cannot any longer have a stop-go Stormont. This time it must endure.

Father Magill's powerful words were heard around the world, but what perhaps people did not see, from those in the cathedral that day who loved Lyra, were some looks of anger—of contempt—as they looked across at the politicians on the pews where the Secretary of State and I sat. We need to think about that, because the tragedy of Lyra's death has given a new impetus for the need for action. Let us not have a future in which people look back with that same anger and contempt because politics has once again failed. Let us build a future where the politics of division is replaced by the politics of unity of purpose, the politics of change and the politics of hope.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his offer of support from all sides of the House in this process. This is not going to be easy—I am realistic about the challenges we face—and it is going to need absolute determination from everybody in this House to help the parties, and to help the leaders of those parties, to do what will be difficult, because there will be difficult accommodations that need to be reached for power sharing to be restored.

However, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is no alternative for the people of Northern Ireland to fully devolved inclusive power sharing. That is the way those difficult decisions were taken in 1998 by politicians who made sacrifices personally. The people of Northern Ireland backed the proposals in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement wholeheartedly and overwhelmingly in a referendum, but did so knowing that they were not getting everything they wanted. They were having to give in certain areas, and that was difficult. We cannot let those sacrifices and the leadership that was shown 21 years ago go to waste. We have to see fully inclusive devolved power sharing in Stormont.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of points, and I will address as many of them as I can. He talked about Northern Ireland being in the news for all the wrong reasons. He and I have had a number of private conversations in the past few days, and he knows that I share that view. That beautiful, dynamic and energetic part of the world is too often ignored until something like the tragedy of the death of Lyra McKee happens, and that should not be the case. We want Northern Ireland to be in the news and celebrated for all the right reasons. I take him back to the comments of Councillor John Boyle, the mayor of Derry and Strabane, who knew Lyra personally—he was one of her tutors. He said that she had always wanted her name in lights, but not for this reason. I think we can all agree with that. He is right to say that the words we heard in the cathedral were echoed around the world, and that they showed a real common understanding of the outrage.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about young people needing a life, not having a gun put in their hands. They need jobs and prosperity. It is not enough to say that unemployment is at a record low and that employment is at an all-time high; we need to keep building on that. We need more investment, and I am working hard to deliver a city deal for Derry and Strabane. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I met to talk about that on Friday, and we need to deliver it. The city deal for Belfast has already been delivered, and the city deal for Derry and Strabane will provide important opportunities.

I have always said that I wanted to restart the talks, but it was realistic to say that they had to wait until after the local elections. I am sad that it has taken such a tragedy to persuade the political leaders to stand together, but I am hopeful and optimistic that we can build on that in the time we have ahead of us after the local elections, before we move into the next part of the year, when excuses could be used for not having talks. We need no more excuses. The time has come for talks, and we need them to start. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the resumption of the talks, but of course not the tragic circumstances that have led to them.

This morning, my Select Committee took evidence in Belfast on the renewable heat incentive, which, as the Secretary of State well knows, was the touchstone for the collapse of the Executive. Does she agree that it is important to resolve that fiasco? What part will the RHI play in the structure of the talks that she has announced today?

Karen Bradley: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee again for his support. He and I had private conversations over the weekend, and it is good to know that there is support from all parts of the House for the activities that we are starting. There will come a time when it is right to talk in this House about the process and structure of the talks and the matters that they deal with, as well as about the issue of an independent chair. I hope that the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) will forgive me for not addressing that point earlier. I am pragmatic about doing this in the way that has the best chance of success, and I am open to all suggestions and thoughts on that matter, but today is the time to show our encouragement to the political leaders in Northern Ireland and tell them that we want to see power sharing resolved. I will be working with the parties over the next few days, and I would be very happy to come to either the Select Committee or this Chamber when we are further into the process to talk about the structure of the talks and the matters that are being discussed.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of her statement. I share the horror of so many people about the death of Lyra McKee and the events that led up to it, and about the deaths and injuries inflicted on so many people that have had less attention. I really welcome the Government's acknowledgement of the clear message of the ordinary people of Northern Ireland, as voiced so eloquently by Father Magill. That message calls for politics and peace, rather than violence and aggression. I say to the Secretary of State, however, that that clear message was being delivered long before the recent violence; it has been a constant refrain in Northern Ireland. The people have been asking for this for many long years, but the politicians here and in Stormont have failed to heed those calls. We should of course recognise those who did not fail and who brought hope. Perhaps ironically, they were often old warhorses from opposing sides of the stand-off that was Northern Ireland politics for so long. We all want to see their successors match that achievement.

What are the Government doing to bring civic society into the talks? Surely the people of Northern Ireland who are not involved in party politics should be part of them. Further, will the UK Government make a commitment that nothing will be done, either in these talks or in other proceedings, that might call into question the Good Friday agreement, or the UK's good faith in protecting it? Will the Government do whatever is necessary to avoid a hard border? Finally, the Secretary of State said that she would not give a running commentary, but while I appreciate the need for space for all the parties to discuss the issues, I must point out that that is almost exactly the wording used during the Brexit negotiations. It strikes me that, in that instance, we would have been in a better place had the Government done more sharing and listened to advice in this Chamber.

Karen Bradley: I welcome the hon. Lady back to speaking on matters regarding Northern Ireland. It is very nice to see her. I know that this is a temporary move, just for today, but it is nice to have her back. She is absolutely right to say that ordinary people have been giving us this message for a very long time; I have heard it time and again. When we brought forward the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill last October, we were clear that it was designed to give the parties space to enable them to come to the accommodation that is needed to get power sharing restored. I am as frustrated as anybody that we have not been able to get to this point before now, and it is a shame that it has taken something so tragic to focus minds, but I repeat what I said to the hon. Member for Rochdale: it has always been the intention that talks would resume after the local elections, and I see a real willingness from the political parties to do that.

The hon. Lady asked questions about the process and structure of the talks, and about civic society. I agree that there is clearly a role for the members of civic society who have done so much to hold things together in the absence of Ministers, but as I said to the Chair of the Select Committee, today is not the day to go into the formal structure of the talks. I will be happy to do that at the appropriate point, but the important thing today is to focus on getting the parties back round the table and getting agreement on the structure and framework of the talks.

The hon. Lady asked about the Government's commitment to the Belfast agreement. I want to put it clearly on record that this Government are steadfast in their commitment to the agreement and its successors, and to all the institutions established by those agreements. She also asked about the hard border issue. We have made it clear, in the joint report in 2017 and in the withdrawal agreement, that we will not allow there to be a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The border in Northern Ireland is not just about the completion of customs dockets and the movement of goods; it is about how people feel and the emotional connection that people have with communities on the other side of the border that contain their families, their friends, their schoolmates and their colleagues. Those communities live side by side and do not see a border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We need to ensure that that continues.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I wish the Secretary of State the best of luck with these talks. May I ask her what she meant when she said that we have a "narrow window in which genuine progress can be made"? Is she setting a deadline for an outcome from the talks, and if so, what will be the consequences if the talks fail? Might there be another election in Northern Ireland, or a move towards direct rule from here?

Karen Bradley: I can well understand why my hon. Friend is keen to ensure that contingency plans are in place, but I think that today is the day to look towards getting the talks started and the potential for them succeeding. I mentioned a narrow window because it is clear that, as for everything in Northern Ireland, there are events in the calendar that make it harder for the parties to come together. One such event is the local elections on Thursday; it is harder for parties to talk to each other and work together when they are out on the doorstep campaigning against each other. Once we have

[Karen Bradley]

got through the local elections, we will have an opportunity for the parties to come together, and I want to use that opportunity.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, and particularly the reference to giving the talks the best possible chance of success. She will remember our discussions on Friday, so does she agree that the talks would be enhanced considerably if all parties, including Sinn Féin, dropped any preconditions and entered the talks with an openness of spirit, endeavouring to try to reach an agreement whereby we all win, instead of it being a win for Sinn Féin and its republican agenda?

Karen Bradley: It was an honour to be invited to the Unity of Purpose group, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member, in Londonderry on Friday. We are trying to organise a visit with the hon. Member for Rochdale as well. It was great to see politicians and members of civic society from all parts of the community in Londonderry sitting around a table and discussing what is right for the people of Derry/Londonderry, so I am determined to revisit with the hon. Gentleman. We can see from that group that it is entirely possible for politicians from opposing parties and from different parts of the community to work together, and that is what we need to see in Stormont.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I understand that one of Sinn Féin's preconditions is that the talks allow for Irish Gaelic to become an official language in Northern Ireland, and be on the same level as English. What percentage of the people of Northern Ireland actually use Gaelic or Irish at home?

Karen Bradley: If my hon. and gallant Friend will forgive me, I do not have the exact percentage, but I am happy to write to him. As for the talks and what will happen, if he will forgive me, today is the day for showing our encouragement for the talks starting, and our support for their succeeding. I will be happy to come back to this House later to give a progress report—hopefully with good news for the people of Northern Ireland.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I wish the Secretary of State well. She has a difficult job. Will she look at the lessons that were learned from the establishment of the St Andrews agreement, which restored devolution last time? It was characterised by four key points. The first was prime ministerial and Taoiseach engagement consistently and intensively over a long period in a very short time, if that makes sense. In addition, all the parties, including the smaller ones, were clearly involved, and there was a clear deadline by which decisions had to be made on areas where there was disagreement. If there was no decision, those disagreements were exposed for further discussion with the people of Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman will have welcomed the fact that the first statement on the talks was a joint statement from the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach. We are looking carefully at all the successful talks processes of the past, and at those that perhaps were not so successful, to learn lessons and ensure the best chance of success this time.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. We all want peace and power sharing in Northern Ireland. Having served there three times on operational tours, I would certainly welcome that most warmly. When she speaks to the Prime Minister, can my right hon. Friend reassure me that she will encourage her not to bring the withdrawal deal back into this House for a fourth time with the backstop, because it threatens the integrity of the United Kingdom and, in doing so, Northern Ireland?

Karen Bradley: I am obviously here today to talk about starting a talks process to restore devolution in Northern Ireland. Decisions about the withdrawal agreement and so on are probably above my pay grade at this point.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): For as long as there has been a peace process, my party has been part of a non-partisan approach to it in this House. In that spirit, may I offer my congratulations and welcome the news that the Secretary of State brings to the House today about the resumption of talks? It is not the case, however, that the whole political process in Northern Ireland has been failing in recent years. My sister party, the Alliance party, has come forward on several occasions with different initiatives, including the appointment of an independent mediator and a review of the petition of concern process. Will the Secretary of State assure me that its voice will be heard in this process, and that the sensible suggestions that it has brought to the table thus far will be given due prominence?

Karen Bradley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support and assure him that it will be an inclusive five-party talks process. The suggestions, ideas and considerations that have been put forward by all parties will of course form part of the process. We want inclusive power sharing that comprises all five parties that are eligible to be part of the Executive.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will agree that the Good Friday agreement must be upheld in Northern Ireland if peace is to be sustained and so that we do not have more murders like the tragic death of Lyra McKee. It is essential for progress in Northern Ireland that the Assembly returns. To give one brief example, the children's food inquiry is going to report to Stormont tomorrow, but there is no one locally—no Minister or Executive—who can take that or any of the other matters forward for the people of Northern Ireland, who want to be able to continue to move forward and who want prosperity to be built on.

Karen Bradley: I agree with the hon. Lady that devolution needs to be restored. She cites one of many examples of why we need Ministers in Stormont taking executive decisions and directing civil servants, and I want to pay tribute to the civil servants, who have acted admirably in the absence of political direction for over two years.

It is important that we continue to make the point that the people who murdered Lyra do not believe in the peace process or in the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That is unlike people in this House and this Government, who are steadfast in their commitment to the Belfast agreement. There is no excuse for what those people did. It was murder. They should not be doing it and

should not have done it. We need to stand up together across this House and across the community in Northern Ireland and say, “No more.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State not agree that the time has passed for talking shops and the time has come for the democratic process to get back into Stormont to debate, vote on and pass legislation? The Northern Ireland Assembly is the only mechanism for getting Northern Ireland back on its feet. There should be no more red lines. We need to get business done, and that can be achieved only by returning to Stormont the elected representatives who want to deliver what our people need: legislative change.

Karen Bradley: I agree that the time has come for politicians to get back to run the schools, hospitals and infrastructure projects and other matters that cross my desk day in, day out. People are crying out for those decisions to be taken. That is why it is so important that we show such resolve from this House to support those politicians, because it will be difficult. Challenging things need to be done and said over the next few weeks, and that will be hard, so we need to give the leaders, who have shown incredible strength and commitment already, the strength to get through the next few weeks.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Father MaGill spoke for many last week when he called for new urgency on behalf of Lyra McKee’s generation—what we might call the “post-Good Friday agreement generation”. As an observer when the Labour Government was deeply involved in this, my reflection is that this process of bringing the parties together only works if there is real focus, grip and determination on the part of the Prime Minister. That is no reflection on the Secretary of State; it is just a reality of how this works. Can the Secretary of State assure the House that we will now see a step change in the Prime Minister’s involvement in this, and that there really will be that focus, grip, doggedness, and refusal to be defeated, even alongside everything else that the Prime Minister is currently dealing with?

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman, if he knows anything about the Prime Minister, will know that she never gives up and is doggedly determined in everything. She has doggedly worked to restore devolution for as long as I have been Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the fact that she was at the funeral last week and that she issued the joint statement with the Taoiseach on Friday should give the right hon. Gentleman the reassurance he needs. And I can reassure him that the Prime Minister always shows absolute commitment to me, as Secretary of State, and to the political leaders across Northern Ireland.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I was nine years old when the Good Friday agreement was signed, so I suppose I am part of the post-Good Friday agreement generation. Many of us are bemused and offended by the intransigence we see facing us in this political impasse. Looking to Lyra for inspiration, her frustration at the impasse is important to us now.

In raising my concerns about Saoradh taking part in a parade in Glasgow this weekend—the parade did not take place in the end—I was confronted by people who questioned all sorts of motives. There is a lack of faith

and lack of trust on both sides. I call out the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys of Derry intimidating Catholics at prayer in Glasgow, and I call out organisations like Saoradh bringing their toxic politics and violence to the city of Glasgow. I call out both sides, because they are the only barriers to peace.

Although I wish the Minister well in the negotiations, does she agree that we need more temperate language from both sides and an understanding that, to paraphrase Mo Mowlam, if both sides are willing to compromise, we will get a good outcome? That is the way ahead. We need to understand that no one will get everything they want out of these negotiations.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman makes his point well. I meet civic society and other leaders in Northern Ireland on a regular basis, and the point was made to me at one of my meetings with church leaders that politicians—this is true for all of us—need to show restraint and respect. They need to respect the other point of view and they need to show restraint in what they are asking for, because the people of Northern Ireland just want and need to see their politicians making the decisions that they elected them to make. They do not want anything else. They just want their politicians to get on with it.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, and she knows we need to strive not just for an agreement to restore our devolved institutions but to do so in a way that commands support right across Northern Ireland. That means a balanced deal, a fair deal and one that everyone in Northern Ireland can look to as a progressive deal.

In doing that, and recognising that nothing can be delivered through these talks without a restored Assembly, will the Secretary of State keep open the prospect of re-establishing the Assembly as soon as possible and conducting a talks process in parallel, just as we did with the Hillsborough talks and the Stormont House talks?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman represents his constituency and his constituents incredibly well, and he is very attuned to the mood of the public. We have had a number of conversations in which he has expressed his frustration about the lack of an Executive and what it means for the people in his constituency, and in which he has spoken about matters he campaigns for passionately—he has been a leading campaigner on the Muckamore Abbey issue.

I want to see the Assembly restored, and it is for the politicians in Northern Ireland to do that. No Government can impose a political settlement on the politicians in Northern Ireland; it has to be an agreement between those politicians. The Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 enables the Executive to be reformed without further action being taken by this House, and I urge politicians to seize this moment. We have a small window, and the public are behind the political leaders and want to see them do the right thing. This is the moment for the political leaders to seize that opportunity, do the right thing and go back into government.

Mr Gregory Campbell: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Just a few moments ago, in criticising—quite rightly, in the view of many, many people—the

[Mr Gregory Campbell]

actions of Saoradh, the political wing of murdering terrorists, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) made an oblique comparison between that group of murdering terrorists and others who walk on the streets such as the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys. That should not go unanswered, and it should be totally and utterly condemned by all right-thinking people.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The hon. Gentleman makes his point. I understand why he wishes to raise a point of order on the matter, but he will appreciate that it is not the responsibility of the Chair. I am quite sure that any hon. Member in this House, in anything they have said, will have meant well.

Mr Sweeney: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for your forbearance.

For the record, it was not my intention in making that statement to conflate the motives of those organisations. I was merely reflecting my constituents' concerns, as brought to me, about the intimidation, as they see it, that has taken place in the city of Glasgow. I was merely reflecting that. I was not conflating violent acts with anything else.

I abhor the actions of Saoradh, which are a different order of violence from anything that has taken place involving any other organisation in recent times. It was not my intention to cause that degree of offence. If it has been received in that way, I beg the forbearance of the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) as it was not my intention.

It is important that both sides understand each other if we want to reach a compromise—that was my intention in raising those concerns. I have had dialogue with both sides on this issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. The hon. Gentleman has been most gracious in his response.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: We will leave it at that.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (CITIZENS' RIGHTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Frank Field presented a Bill to safeguard rights of European Union citizens in the United Kingdom after exit day; to make provision for arrangements to be made with other European Economic Area countries and Switzerland to maintain the rights of British citizens in those countries after exit day; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 383).

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): If tomorrow is anything like today, I will get it all through.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): You may say that. I cannot possibly comment.

Exiting the European Union (Sanctions)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we will debate motions 1 to 4 together.

6.26 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I beg to move motion 1,

That the Chemical Weapons (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 618), which were laid before this House on 22 March, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this we shall consider the following:

Motion 2—*Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Zimbabwe)*—

That the Zimbabwe (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 604), which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved.

Motion 3—*Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Republic of Belarus)*—

That the Republic of Belarus (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 600), which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved.

Motion 4—*Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Syria)*—

That the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 792), which were laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.

Sir Alan Duncan: Right hon. and hon. Members will be well aware of the importance of sanctions, which are a key element of our approach to our most important international priorities. They help to defend our national interests, support our foreign policy and protect our national security. They also demonstrate our support for the rules-based international order.

The UK has been a leading contributor to the development of multilateral sanctions in recent years. We have been particularly influential in guiding the EU's approach, which is why, when we transpose the EU sanctions regimes to the UK, we intend to carry over its policy effect. I will say more about that in a moment.

We are committed to maintaining our sanctions capabilities and leadership role after we leave the EU. Colleagues will recall that the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 provides the UK with the legal powers to impose, update and lift sanctions after we leave the EU. This was the first major legislative step in creating an independent UK sanctions framework.

However, although the Act sets out the framework needed to impose our own independent sanctions, we need statutory instruments to set out the detail of each sanctions regime within that framework. Such statutory instruments set out the purposes of our sanctions regimes, the criteria under which the Secretary of State may designate individuals and entities and the types of restrictive measures imposed. They do not specify which individuals or entities will be sanctioned. The Government will publish the list of those we are sanctioning under UK legislation when the prohibitions come into force. We will seek to transfer EU designations in each case, but

those decisions will be subject to the legal tests set out in the Act. Any EU listings that do not meet the tests will not be implemented.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Although we will become “independent”, in that sense of the word, in relation to sanctions, how does the Minister propose to co-operate with other countries? Is there a mechanism for the Government to do that, so that we can control chemical weapons?

Sir Alan Duncan: If we leave the EU with a deal, there will be a period of transition in which we will retain our sanctions under the existing EU system. If we leave with no deal, which is what we are addressing today, we will need to trigger our autonomous right to have sanctions. Therefore, we need these statutory instruments. I am sure that in the event that we are not part of the EU, our leadership on sanctions and the fact that the City of London is such an important financial centre for money laundering—[*Laughter.*] For anti-money laundering. It will mean that we retain our pre-eminent role in influencing sanctions, as we have in the past.

The House may recall that review and reporting requirements were incorporated in the 2018 Act. We have therefore published alongside these statutory instruments a report on the purposes of each sanctions regime, and on the penalties contained within each instrument. Those reports are available in the Vote Office, should Members have an interest in them, and the Government will review each sanctions regime on a regular basis. I wish to thank the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments for its close and helpful scrutiny of so many statutory instruments relating to sanctions over recent months.

The four SIs under consideration are those that transfer into UK law the EU sanctions regimes on chemical weapons, Zimbabwe, Belarus and Syria. In each case, the instrument seeks to deliver substantially the same policy effects as the measures in the corresponding EU regime. Hon. Members will note that human rights are a significant focus of some of the sanctions regimes under consideration today. I know that many hon. Members are keen for the UK to develop our own stand-alone human rights sanctions regime under the 2018 Act and may therefore query why we are simply transferring existing EU sanctions regimes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Obviously the sanctions are there for the purpose of suggesting change, if that can be done, in Zimbabwe, Belarus, Syria and so on. I am conscious of the need to have human rights and a democratic process that actually works. Does the Minister feel that what we are doing now, alongside those who have worked within Europe in the past, will influence change in human rights, including sometimes the rights of those of religious belief?

Sir Alan Duncan: In general terms, the answer is yes, I very much hope so. That is what sanctions are designed to do. However, as the House will appreciate, we are today just looking at the framework within which specific sanctions regimes can fit, rather than at the actual sanctions regimes or indeed their efficacy and effect in the countries we are discussing. We are looking at a legal framework under these SIs; we are not really looking at the full operation of the sanctions that may form part of the framework we are setting up today.

[Sir Alan Duncan]

I assure colleagues that the 2018 Act does indeed provide the necessary powers in UK law to allow us to develop our own regime. However, these SIs were laid on a contingent basis to provide for the continuation of sanctions should we leave the EU without a deal. As such, our priority has necessarily been to ensure the transfer of existing EU measures by laying SIs such as these. We will give consideration to new regimes as circumstances suggest and as parliamentary time allows. Approving these regulations would ensure that we have the necessary powers to impose sanctions in respect of Zimbabwe, Belarus and Syria, and in respect of the proliferation and use of chemical weapons, from the date of our EU exit. In the event of a deal, EU sanctions would continue to apply during the implementation period, and these instruments would not immediately be needed. As a member of the EU, or during the implementation period, EU sanctions will apply in the UK. We will look to use the powers provided by the 2018 Act to the fullest extent possible during this period, but there will be some limitations on the measures we can impose autonomously. I wish quickly to describe the purpose of each regime.

The chemical weapons sanctions regulations aim to deter the use and proliferation of chemical weapons, and encourage the effective implementation of the chemical weapons convention, by imposing immigration and financial sanctions on those involved in their use and proliferation.

The Zimbabwe sanctions regulations aim to encourage the Government of Zimbabwe to respect democratic principles, the rule of law and human rights, and to deter the repression of civil society. The regulations impose an arms embargo and other financial, immigration and trade restrictions, including on the trade in goods and technology that may be used for internal repression.

The Belarus sanctions regulations aim to address human rights abuses and threats to the rule of law, and to encourage the proper investigation and institution of criminal proceedings against those responsible for the disappearance of four individuals. The measures include an arms embargo, financial and immigration sanctions, and restrictions on goods or technology that may be used for internal repression.

The Syria sanctions regulations aim to deter the Syrian regime from actions, policies or activities that repress the civilian population, and to encourage a negotiated political settlement to end the conflict. The regulations include asset freezes and/or travel bans on designated persons, together with financial, sectoral and aircraft sanctions; and wide-ranging trade restrictions, including on goods and technology that may be used for internal repression and the interception and monitoring of telecommunications, but also in respect of other goods and technology, such as crude oil, jet fuel, luxury goods and items that can contribute to chemical and biological weapons.

These four SIs transfer into UK law well-established EU sanctions regimes that are in line with the UK's foreign policy priorities. They encourage respect for human rights, the rule of law and security and stability in very difficult environments—

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am about to finish. If the hon. Gentleman would like to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, he may stand a chance of asking some questions, which I will answer at the end.

Approving these SIs will allow the UK to continue to implement sanctions from the moment we leave the EU, and it will send a strong signal of our intention to continue to play a leading role in the development and implementation of sanctions in the future. I commend them to the House.

6.37 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): We do not intend to divide the House on these statutory instruments, because we believe that in the event of a no-deal Brexit it would be right to roll over these sanctions in their current form, which is what we are providing for. However, the papers before us include some detailed descriptions of the sanctions and explanatory memorandums setting out their purpose—what the SIs are intended to do and why—so I want to ask the Minister a couple of questions. I will structure it in a slightly different way, because I think the order on the Order Paper is completely illogical, but I will begin by discussing chemical weapons.

The use of chemical weapons is prohibited, and the chemical weapons convention covering these sanctions is now 20 years old. In general, the convention has been a significant success, because 97% of the stockpiles of chemical weapons have been destroyed. However, we want to think about ways in which we can strengthen enforcement of the convention. Obviously, the sanctions are part of that enforcement mechanism. The current sanctions apply entirely to people from Syria or to Russians who have worked for the GRU—that is because of their involvement in the Salisbury incident. On the strengthening of enforcement, in addition to these and possible further sanctions, have the Government considered requesting challenge inspections, which are used if one country thinks another country has not been telling the truth about its stockpiles? It is possible to request such inspections through the UN Security Council. Given the fact that there is evidence of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, Malaysia, Indonesia—to which I shall come—and Great Britain, might the Government like to think about requesting challenge inspections?

I have a technical question for the Minister. According to Human Rights Watch, chemical weapons have been used 85 times in the Syria conflict. As I said, the sanctions relating to chemical weapons and Syria cover Russians and Syrians, but it is believed that Daesh has used some chemical weapons in Syria, and Daesh is currently not covered by the sanctions at all. Why is that, and what consideration have the Government given to the matter? Is it simply not necessary because Daesh is a proscribed terrorist group, or is there some other reason? Does the Minister anticipate changing the chemical weapons regime when we have an independent sanctions policy?

I am extremely concerned about allegations that white phosphorus was used in West Papua in December 2018. I have met a human rights defender who has a lot of detailed information about the allegation, which is extremely disappointing because the human rights situation in Indonesia has improved markedly over the past 20 years. The use of white phosphorus by the security services

would obviously be a breach of the chemical weapons convention. If the Minister or his officials do not have the answer now, please could they write to me on the matter?

Let me turn to the statutory instrument on Syria. The current sanctions that the Minister proposes to roll over cover 277 individuals and 51 entities—he mentioned oil, luxury goods and so on. Will the Minister update the House on the effectiveness of the sanctions and on what other steps the Government are taking to reduce the terrible ongoing conflict in Syria? When and how does the Minister think a negotiated political solution with the consent of the Syrian people is going to be achieved?

I wish to draw the Minister's attention to what seems to be a hole in the Syria sanctions. They are meant to cover members of President Assad's close family and his close associates, but it has come to light that his niece has been living and studying in the UK for some time. She was able to gain entry to this country, to enrol on not just one but two university courses, and to fund her stay, all apparently without the authorities noticing. Many people will be extremely angry to hear about that. The immigration regulations in this country are now quite tight, and people often come to Members when they are about to be thrown out by the Border Agency, yet the niece of President Assad, one of the most serious serial human rights abusers, who has used chemical weapons against his own people, has been allowed to live peacefully and happily in this country and to secure her education here. That cannot be right. What does the Minister think about it and what is he going to do about it?

Let me turn to Belarus, as there are obviously connections between the sanctions against Russians and the Belarus sanctions. In respect of human rights in Europe, Belarus is currently in the deep freeze, but the sanctions are quite narrow, covering only four people. Does the Minister think the sanctions are proving to be effective in affecting the behaviour of the Belarus Government? As he said, evidence of human rights violations in Belarus continues to come in. In 2016, the EU decided to lift sanctions against 170 people, but the ongoing human rights situation in Belarus is extremely serious. The Minister said that the sanctions were related only to the disappearance of four individuals; why were those four particular episodes the ones on which the Government and the European Union alighted in respect of their sanctions policy? I am pleased that, being the Minister for Europe, the Minister knows a lot about Belarus and will be able to tell the House what is going on. Does he give any credibility at all to Moscow's proposal for the unification of Russia and Belarus?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the hon. Lady goes any further, she and the House will appreciate that the matter we are debating is very narrow, because it has to do with exactly what is on the Order Paper in respect of these sanctions. I am being fairly liberal—with a small l—because I appreciate that the Minister probably does have the information to which the hon. Lady refers, but my concern is to make sure that the debate that we have right now, as opposed to a wider debate at another time, relates to what is on the Order Paper.

Helen Goodman: I was about to move on to Zimbabwe, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I am sure I can satisfy you.

On Zimbabwe, we have only limited sanctions that relate only to President Mugabe and the defence industries. The purpose of the sanctions is to improve the human rights situation in Zimbabwe, but how can they possibly be effective, given that Zimbabwe has a new Government? How can sanctions on a previous regime conceivably affect the new regime? That new regime has been described by some Zimbabweans as a new driver in an old taxi. The situation does not quite make sense.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The hon. Lady may be aware that some of those widely believed to be responsible for human rights violations in Zimbabwe under the previous President are still closely associated with the new Government. Does she agree that if there is evidence that any of those individuals have committed serious violations of the human rights of UK citizens, who have been forced to flee Zimbabwe and come back to the UK as a result, they should also be subjected to sanctions, and that those sanctions should apply until such a time as the UK citizens have been given proper compensation through the courts?

Helen Goodman: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. There has been a brutal crackdown on protests, with 2,354 violations of human rights, including 17 deaths and 17 rapes. I hope that the Minister will take that into account and tell us what precisely the Government will do to achieve change. I also want to know whether the Government's policy on sanctions is being co-ordinated with the policy being run by the Department for International Development to tackle the drought. Obviously, one of the problems with sanctions is that, when we have sanctions against a country, delivering aid can sometimes be quite tricky, as knowing which transactions can pass through and which cannot can be complicated.

I do not know whether, as well as discussing the sanctions with the European Union, the Minister has been co-ordinating with the African Union. The current position is that Zimbabwe will not be allowed to rejoin the Commonwealth until it improves its human rights record, but will the Minister please tell us the co-ordination mechanism with the African Union?

That brings me to my final general point, which I also raised in our last debate on sanctions. How will we co-ordinate with the European Union after we have left? Everybody in this House fully understands that just one country's sanctions cannot be effective. This only works when we have co-ordination internationally. Sometimes that co-ordination is at the UN level and sometimes, as in the case of these regimes, it is at the European level, but the Minister has not as yet been able to tell us what co-ordination mechanisms the Government are planning post Brexit. It would be interesting to know from him what he envisages, both in the scenario of leaving with a deal and in the case of leaving without a deal.

6.51 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I need to duck out immediately after my speech, as I have explained to the Whip on duty. I intend to return, I hope in time for the wind-ups. Forgive me for leaving immediately after a speech, which I rarely do.

I want to speak briefly to emphasise the importance of the roll-over of these sanctions, in particular in relation to Syria, an area I know something about, and

[Alistair Burt]

the prohibition of chemical weapons. Sanctions are an international symbol, and they are important not only as regards the individuals designated, but as a sign of international concern about breaches of international law. We live in a fragile world. It is made up of different blocs that have created a post-war consensus, and a series of rules and regulations that have held the world in check, including in some very difficult areas.

I agree with the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) that the prohibition of chemical weapons measure has worked particularly well, as has the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. If it is breached—it has been broken in relation to Syria and in relation to the UK in recent times—we are all at risk. Ensuring that there is a sanctions regime is important in itself, and for the individuals concerned.

I am concerned about the risk of Syria becoming almost a forgotten conflict, because it is no longer on the front pages—and it needs to be. As some of us feared, there was a risk that interventions in Syria—not by the west, but by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah—would enable the regime to recover territory and effectively reach a position where the conflict was resolved to its benefit. As that has gone quiet, we have forgotten the indignities suffered by the Syrian people—the millions who have been displaced internally and the millions who have gone abroad. The sanctions regime is essential to keep that in people's minds. Sanctions contain those who have been associated with a regime that has waged war and made chemical attacks on its own people.

There is a concern about so-called normalisation. There has to be a future for the countries that border Syria; we all understand that. Lebanon and Jordan in particular want to return refugees—of course they do—but there can be no normalisation with a regime that continues to treat its people as it does. We are aware that when refugees go back to recovered areas in Lebanon or Jordan, and speak to their families and say what is happening, they are interrogated. Young people are conscripted and taken away to potential battle areas. The same indignities that were heaped on people and the offences committed against them in the past take place again. There can be no normalisation in those circumstances. It would matter hugely to those who are watching every move, and who believe that there should be justice after the conflict, if sanctions were not rolled over, and if we were not able to take this sort of action in Syria.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): My very good and right hon. Friend talks about sanctions and something happening. Under international law, what can happen to people who are named in one of these sanctions?

Alistair Burt: The sanctions have been imposed on a series of individuals connected with the regime. They affect their financial transactions. Many of them remain involved internationally; they want to make investments, to have money coming through, and to be able to conduct their business. Sanctions make that difficult. We know that around any regime there are the cronies who keep it in place through their use of money and assets. Sanctions make all that much more difficult.

That is different from the case of those who might be identified through another process as being guilty of crimes. There must be some sort of investigation into war crimes after the Syrian conflict comes to an end. Sanctions increase pressure on the regime to recognise that there can be no normalisation unless it follows the UN process, there is a political process, and there is political change in Syria that means that the people have an opportunity of a normal life after the conflict.

If the sanctions regime was not there—if the international community forgot about Syria—the situation would be so much worse, so I welcome the measures proposed by my right hon. Friend the Minister. In answer to the last point made by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, I believe that it will be possible to have a strong relationship with the European Union and other entities to ensure international co-operation on these sanctions. We are an island in one sense, but in another we are not. We need to make sure that we have the contacts and the abilities to ensure that we are part of an international sanctions regime to ensure maximum pressure on those who have caused harm and perpetuate a system that causes damage.

I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for bringing the measures forward, and to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland for her response, which ensures that there is consensus on this, as there must be. For the people of Syria, this will bring a welcome sense that they are not forgotten, and that there will be justice for the crimes committed against them.

6.57 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): My comments will be relatively brief, but there are important issues to be discussed. This will certainly be part of ongoing discussions as the UK decides how to leave the EU. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), speaking from the Front Bench for the official Opposition, talked about that relationship and what would happen about the co-ordination of activities. We should not lose sight of that as developments take place, but it is entirely responsible to keep applying sanctions, particularly on chemical weapons and their use, and against proliferation, as the UK leaves the EU. It is important that we all use all our efforts to prevent the proliferation of these weapons and encourage the effective implementation of the convention on the prohibition of the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and on their final destruction.

On Zimbabwe, it is again entirely necessary for the UK to remain in support of, and to continue to apply, the sanctions put in place through the EU. We should always be ready to protect and promote human rights wherever they are denied, and these sanctions are very necessary in applying pressure to oppressive regimes, so that they improve their human rights record, whatever that may be.

The EU maintains a far-reaching and powerful sanctions regime, and we should be keen to align ourselves with our closest allies in the EU—even though the UK is leaving the EU very soon and will no longer be a member state, I am sure that there are parts of the UK that have other ambitions in that regard.

The UK is Belarus's third biggest trading partner after Russia and Ukraine, and the second largest investor in the country. It is important that the UK continues its

actions on human rights and freedom of the press, and it is entirely necessary for pressure to be applied to keep a focus on human rights abuses.

In Syria, we have seen a regime that has used chemical weapons against its own people; 400,000 people have been killed there, and half of Syria's population has been displaced. The EU imposed sanctions in 2011. As the Minister said, these sanctions include travel bans and asset freezing. We would expect sanctions to continue multilaterally to ensure that we work hand in glove with the EU, and our allies and partners. The Minister has mentioned co-ordination; I would like reassurance about the Government's position in that regard.

It really is a huge disappointment that this is all about the UK Government taking a certain path while Scotland is dragged out of the EU against its will, and in contravention of the vote in Scotland, where people voted to remain in very large numbers. The UK has decided on its own path, which is why the Government are using parliamentary time now to unravel 40 years of co-operation across Europe, but they should not be surprised if Scotland takes her own path in the coming months and years. We perhaps see our future as the new 28th state of the EU, and I think it would be appropriate if Scotland was a direct replacement for the UK in that process. But whatever the outcome of any future referendum in Scotland, I hope that we can continue to work hand in glove, shoulder to shoulder, with other EU states to maintain the sanctions regime.

7.2 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): It is a pleasure to hear that the importance of rolling over these sanctions is supported on both sides of the House. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) spoke with considerable knowledge and authority about the sanctions against Syria. I will concentrate on another of the three countries on whom this set of sanctions will be maintained: Belarus.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on Belarus in this place, and last year led an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Minsk. Later this year, we will be inviting Belarus to pay a return visit and send a delegation to visit the UK. The explanatory memorandum to these sanctions regulations refers to the need for respect of "democratic principles and institutions" in Belarus; but one has to say that there is still some way to go. The Parliament in Minsk and the parliamentary institutions of Belarus are not quite as we would recognise in this country. Those who do sit in Parliament have been largely appointed by the President, and those who were not appointed directly have certainly been approved by the President in taking up their position. The President himself first took office in 1994. He has won several elections since then, usually by over 90% of the vote, and the bodies that have observed those elections—not least the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe—have raised considerable concerns about their validity.

Belarus is also undoubtedly still firmly within the Russian orbit, and one has to accept that its room for manoeuvre is severely limited by what the Kremlin allows. Having said that, there are some signs of progress. Belarus did not recognise the Russian occupation of South Ossetia, of Abkhazia or of Crimea, and there are signs that it wishes to edge away and that some progress

is being made. It was for that reason that the IPU decided that it was worthwhile to send a delegation to encourage further steps of progress, and I pay tribute to our excellent ambassador in Minsk, who is pressing for reform while also seeking to ensure that we have relations with the Government and institutions of Belarus.

There are also economic opportunities in Belarus, as the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) pointed out. The UK is a considerable market for Belarus exports. I have to say that Belarus is a rather smaller market for UK exports, but nevertheless there is an opportunity there. However, when it comes to human rights, it is worth noting that Belarus is still, I think, the only country in Europe that institutes the death penalty. The number of people executed actually doubled last year—to four. Assurances that Belarus is seeking to have a moratorium on the imposition of the death penalty have been rather disproved by its recent actions, and that too is a considerable stain on its record and prevents it from joining the Council of Europe among other things.

The explanatory memorandum for these sanctions names four individuals. The first three—Yury Zakharka, Viktor Hanchar and Anatol Krasouski—were all opposition politicians who were previously quite close to President Lukashenko, but found themselves in opposition to him and then died in 1999. Some were abducted, and the courts have now ruled that they were almost certainly murdered. Quite exactly what happened, we still do not know.

The fourth individual named on the explanatory memorandum and the regulations is Dzmitry Zavadski, and I mention him specifically because although he was President Lukashenko's personal cameraman, he also practised widely as a journalist. As the Minister and others may know, I am a very strong supporter of media freedom. I strongly welcome the initiative that the Foreign Secretary has taken to make media freedom a priority of this Government to the extent of organising an international conference on it in July. The IPU, which I have the honour to chair, will be following that up.

The death of Mr Zavadski is a terrible blot, but it is worth mentioning another individual who worked alongside him—Pavel Sheremet. Pavel Sheremet was another Belarusian journalist who fell out with the President. He was also a critic of President Putin and a great friend of Boris Nemtsov in Russia. He was assassinated in a car bomb in Kiev in 2016, and his murder is another example of the risks that journalists take and how they sometimes pay a price with their lives. We should always raise the issue of Pavel Sheremet. Quite who was responsible for his death is unclear—he made a number of enemies among people who could well have been responsible—but he was a Belarusian journalist. He was also one of the founders of Charter 97, which is a human rights organisation that operates in Belarus. I met representatives of Charter 97 just a few weeks ago. Its founder was also killed, the editor-in-chief fled and is now in Poland, and access to its website is blocked in Belarus.

The record in Belarus is not good. I therefore certainly would not argue that sanctions should necessarily be lifted. However, I would say that we should keep them under review and that we should encourage where there are signs of progress. I hope that there is some movement

[Mr John Whittingdale]

towards greater liberalisation and away from the alliance with Russia. On that subject, I will not bore the Minister by repeating what has come up regularly in these debates but merely say that the sanctions against Russia remain of huge importance. We await the Government's announcement of the implementation of the Magnitsky sanctions following the passage of the necessary legislation in this House. If ever we needed an example of why those sanctions against Russia remain of huge importance, it was the Minister's excellent response to the debate that we had last week on the Russian annexation of Crimea. He will know that within hours of that, the Russians announced that they were going to make passports available to people living in Donbass. I am very pleased that the Foreign Office made clear our condemnation of that further provocation by Russia against the people and Government of Ukraine.

I strongly support these sanctions. However, I was keen to take this opportunity to put it on the record that although the sanctions against Belarus are justified, there are nevertheless small signs of progress.

7.10 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). He referred to the fact that the explanatory memorandum on the sanctions on Belarus does include the names of individuals, whereas, in contrast, the explanatory memorandums on Zimbabwe and on Syria specifically say that they do not. Clearly, there may be reasons for that in terms of individuals being able to know that they were on lists, but perhaps the Minister—if he is listening—will be able to respond to my point to clarify exactly why Belarus is being treated differently from Syria and Zimbabwe.

We are once again debating in this House matters that are probably a complete waste of our time, because everybody knows that there is not going to be a no-deal Brexit and that it may even be, hopefully, that we will not have Brexit at all. It is a bit like Alice in Wonderland: we keep coming back to having the same old discussions about things that probably will not happen. Nevertheless, we have to do it, so I will briefly refer to some of the issues that have been touched on.

The chemical weapons sanctions are extremely important, but we have to be honest about this. The chemical weapons convention is about 20 years old. I was involved in the debates in the House at that time. In fact, I had an Adjournment debate urging the Government to ratify the convention. I can recall how important those discussions were. However, we know that countries lie and cheat. The Assad regime in Syria was a signatory to the convention. It apparently had no chemical weapons whatsoever. Then suddenly, after the use of chemical weapons and the threat of military action by the Obama Administration in 2013, the Russians were able to make an arrangement to remove massive stockpiles of the chemical weapons that the Syrian regime apparently did not have. Subsequently, it has become clear that the apparent removal of all of Syria's chemical weapons has not been the case, because, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) mentioned, there has been documented use of chemical weapons—I think she said 86 times—within Syria. The overwhelming

majority of those occasions have been related to use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime, so we know that the convention—and therefore the sanctions that relate to it and compliance with it—has not been totally effective.

We need to revisit these issues internationally and to have more robust measures. Some of the robust measures that we can take are against designated individuals. There is a connection between the chemical weapons use in Syria and the chemical weapons convention. Mention was previously made of individuals living in this country who are acting as conduits, or bankers, for the Assad regime, either through family connections or through corrupt connections of another kind. We all know from the series “McMafia” that people in accountancy and law firms in our capital city are facilitating the way in which people get round sanctions. Last year, the Foreign Affairs Committee produced a very good report called “Moscow's Gold” that detailed how Russia had a malign role within the City of London and elsewhere.

Clearly, Russia-friendly regimes such as those in Syria, Belarus and other places can use various mechanisms to get round financial sanctions. Whether it is done through London, from offshore British overseas territories or via other jurisdictions, we need to be more vigilant on these issues. Although the European Union plays a very important role, we also have to recognise that this is a global issue. It is not sufficient for us to act in a European context; we also need the United States, and other countries, to come together to make sure that there is vigorous enforcement of the sanctions regime.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very important point about the need for global co-operation on this. Does he believe that the UK should be taking a leading role in the UN, as it does, to make sure that there is true global co-operation to apply sanctions in multinational blocs but also to make sure that they are enforced, and that we co-operate to encourage as much good behaviour as possible?

Mike Gapes: Yes. I have been in discussions with people within the UN system who deal with the issue of terrorist financing, for example. UK officials, former or current, have always played an important role in that system. I pay tribute to the role of our people within the UN system. We need to work globally, but we also need to continue to strengthen the European Union's sanctions regime for however long we remain members.

The sanctions regime in Zimbabwe was brought in against the Mugabe regime. There were a number of occasions when high-profile individuals were still able to attend international meetings. These were designated meetings in Brussels or in other European capitals that even Mugabe himself was able to attend. Our hope, with the democratic change in Zimbabwe, was that there would be a normalisation of politics in Zimbabwe and that sanctions would then be lifted to help the economic and social development of that country, which has suffered so much under the brutal dictatorship that it has had. Sadly, Zimbabwe is not making the progress that was hoped for. However, I am not sure whether the current sanctions regime is actually the best way forward to deal with the problems in Zimbabwe. We need to look at the possibility of trying to encourage a transition

that there is clearly public demand for. Zimbabwe is also, because of its geographical position, suffering from the impact of the cyclones that have hit Mozambique—they have also gone across into parts of Zimbabwe. I hope that the Minister can address that issue as well.

7.19 pm

Sir Alan Duncan: I would genuinely like to thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. Many have done so from a position of significant expertise and knowledge of the countries mentioned in the framework sanctions regime we are discussing.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am mindful of your stricture that we must not stray from the matters on the Order Paper, but inevitably some Members have been drawn into discussing the broader national issues around the framework law we are discussing. I am sure that the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will appreciate that it would be inappropriate for me to comment on an individual such as the niece of President Assad.

Helen Goodman *rose*—

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady seems slightly indignant, and I am happy to give way.

Helen Goodman: Well, I am indignant. The convention in the House is surely that anything covered in an explanatory memorandum is reasonable to put to the Minister. I am extremely concerned that the niece of President Assad has been allowed to live and study in this country. Surely if the Minister looks at part 2 of the regulations on the designation of persons, he can see that she is a person who has supported or benefited from the Syrian regime and is a prominent person—she falls into the categories included in the documents, as does the question I raised about Daesh and about the white phosphorus incident in Indonesia. It may be inconvenient for the Minister to answer those questions, but it must surely be in order.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am afraid that the hon. Lady's indignation is wrong on all counts. First, white phosphorus does not fall under the chemical weapons regime as it is a different sort of weapon, nor does Daesh, which falls under other regimes related to al-Qaeda and Daesh. I think it would be highly inappropriate for me to discuss an individual when we are looking at the framework within which the sort of designations the hon. Lady mentions can take place. These regulations put in place the law within which those designations can happen. We are not specifically looking at the designations themselves.

In respect of what we are able to transfer into the framework we are discussing, the sanctions relating to Belarus, for instance, were agreed in 2004. The EU sanctions regime currently imposes asset freezes and travel bans on four Belarus nationals with links to the Belarus Government who were implicated in the disappearance of two opposition politicians, a businessman and a journalist in 1999 and 2000. The hon. Lady also asked about changing the chemical weapons regime. We are mindful of our and others' obligations under the chemical weapons convention and, through the regulations, we would have the flexibility to change sanctions should it be thought appropriate.

These regulations are necessary to enable the UK to implement our independent sanctions policy within the framework of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 from the moment we leave the EU. Approving the regulations would in no way prevent the development of an autonomous human rights sanctions regime. The sanctions Act enables sanctions to be imposed for a variety of purposes, including responding to or deterring gross violations of human rights, or otherwise promoting compliance with human rights law or to respect human rights.

Sanctions are an integral part of our response to the most important foreign policy challenges we face. We must be ready to deliver sanctions independently as soon as the UK leaves the EU, and that is why these statutory instruments are so important. Transposing EU sanctions regimes in this way puts the UK on a solid footing to continue to protect our interests, defend our values and maintain the position of leadership that we have built on sanctions over so many years. I commend the regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Chemical Weapons (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 618), which were laid before this House on 22 March, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS) (ZIMBABWE)

Resolved,

That the Zimbabwe (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 604), which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS) (REPUBLIC OF BELARUS)

Resolved,

That the Republic of Belarus (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 600), which were laid before this House on 20 March, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS) (SYRIA)

Resolved,

That the Syria (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 792), which were laid before this House on 5 April, be approved.—(*Sir Alan Duncan.*)

INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENT

Resolved,

That Ian Blackford be removed from the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament under Schedule 1 to the Justice and Security Act 2013 and Stewart Hosie be appointed to that Committee under section 1 of that Act.—(*Paul Maynard.*)

Business without Debate

STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)

Ordered,

That Dan Carden be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Susan Elan Jones be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Private Tower Blocks: Removal of Cladding

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

7.26 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I have secured this debate to highlight the grave danger facing thousands of people living in privately owned high-rise blocks in my constituency—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot have leftover conversations from the last debate getting in the way of the hon. Lady's speech. It is important that she is heard.

Rushanara Ali: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I secured this debate to highlight the grave danger facing thousands of people living in privately owned high-rise blocks in my constituency and up and down the country. I am referring, of course, to the presence of aluminium composite material—ACM—cladding on tower blocks that are owned by private companies, not council or housing associations. The danger is real and deeply worrying but can easily be alleviated if Ministers decide to take action. I hope that the Minister will today set out a firm plan of action with a clear set of deadlines to put the situation right.

It is unlikely that many of us would have been aware or known what ACM cladding was were it not for the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire. On the terrible night of 14 June 2017, 72 people lost their lives, and many more were injured, lost their homes and suffered a trauma that they are likely to carry with them for the rest of their lives. It was a trauma shared by the whole nation, which watched this needless tragedy.

It is clear that ACM cladding contributed to the speed with which the fire spread up and down the building, and to the loss of life. This was an avoidable, man-made disaster. Shockingly, the nation then discovered that this kind of cladding and similar flammable cladding is present on hundreds of blocks and other buildings around the country. In the immediate aftermath, Ministers promised swift action to replace ACM and other flammable materials on high-rise blocks, but instead, we have seen unacceptably slow progress, and 22 months later, 345 high-rise buildings with ACM panels have yet to be made safe.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and congratulate her on securing a debate on this issue, which has elicited the emotion and interest of the House over a period. Does she agree that it is imperative that the cladding is removed quickly and that a Government-aided scheme would ensure that owners do the right thing and we see the prevention of another Grenfell tragedy? That has to be our goal. It is good to see the Minister in his place; we are all appreciative of him and look forward to his response. I add that the hon. Lady has another two and a half hours for her debate.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, and I very much hope that the Minister will say something concrete about legislation and about

other steps that he and his Government will take to rectify this appalling problem.

This is deeply worrying for families living in those blocks, and is causing huge anxiety, fear and insecurity. Many of my constituents have raised serious concerns. One of them said that

“we are trapped with crippling fire warden charges and have an unsaleable flat. My wife is now taking anti-depressants.”

The UK Cladding Action Group, established by residents in these unsafe blocks, has run a survey showing the impact on the mental health of these residents, and 88% stated that their mental health was worse than before. One resident said:

“I feel as though I could burn alive at any minute. I live in constant fear, my physical and mental health has taken a huge impact. My financial situation is unbearable, I cannot sell my property or remortgage. I am stuck in a nightmare”.

Another said:

“The massive £18,500 charge bestowed upon me is completely un-payable in my current financial situation. I have put everything on hold in the hope of a solution to present itself but currently nothing.”

Another said:

“I was made redundant and can't get a loan, can't remortgage or sell my property. I feel trapped and the anxiety of this is affecting me getting another job”.

Another said:

“The constant stress and worry has destroyed the relationship with my long term partner and as a result we have terminated our relationship. She could not handle living in a building that could kill us”.

Another said:

“The financial stress and feeling unsafe in my own home is taking a huge toll on our lives—we are also getting married in two months and this huge cladding bill has overridden everything. We want to move so we can start a family but are unable to as the flat is not sellable, and we can't raise a family in such a flammable building.”

Others have listed many examples of struggle and trauma. One resident said:

“My partner and I need to sell our property to buy a bigger place because I am pregnant and expecting our first child in 1 month. However, we have been unable to do this due to the cladding. This has caused immense amounts of anxiety and stress. We have also had to put our wedding plans on hold.”

Another said:

“I can't sleep very well. I think about my unsafe property daily. I can't believe that I bought it in good faith, thinking I'd live in a safe and happy home. I'm stressed every day.”

Others have talked about their health issues. One resident said:

“I suffer from an auto immune condition. Stress and working long hours can make the symptoms worse. This is a stressful situation as I feel I may not be able to sell/remortgage my property. And now I'm not only worried about my family's safety, I'm worried about our financial security. So now I'm working harder than ever.”

Another said:

“My boyfriend has moved to Italy without me as I cannot sell my flat... I have had to take a second job as I am unable to sell the property and release capital”.

Another of the residents said:

“This has been the worst 21 months of my life. I am struggling to get through each day. Gone is the enjoyment of life.”

There are hundreds of these testimonies, and I have highlighted just some of the experiences of anxiety and fear, as well as devastation, that living in ACM-cladded properties has caused people up and down the country, as well as in my own constituency.

On 8 May, the UK Cladding Action Group will host a meeting to share its findings and concerns. I hope the Minister will be able to meet us at this very important meeting, and that Members from across the House will join the residents attending that meeting.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my anxiety for the leaseholders who, even when the freeholder has done the right thing and removed the cladding, are left in negative equity, where the value of their flat is actually less than the bill hanging over their head for the removal of the cladding?

Rushanara Ali: Absolutely. I fully agree because the leaseholders bought the properties in good faith; they did not know that these blocks had ACM cladding. If anyone is responsible, it is the Government because the ACM cladding should never have been used—it was dangerous—and that is why it is important that the Government deal with this issue to protect people from this predicament.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): On that very point, a lot of the retrofitting that used this type of cladding was actually done to comply with EU regulations on the energy efficiency of those buildings. As a consequence, those involved fell through the loophole of having to obtain an energy efficiency certificate for a building to comply legally with the associated legislation without, unfortunately, the safeguard of putting on something that met all the fire regulations and complied accordingly.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He has woven in the European perspective, but I would say to him that, fundamentally, the duty of care is with our Government—of whichever political colour—and there was nothing stopping the Government making sure that flammable cladding was not used, so to revert to blaming the EU is frankly unhelpful and not in the spirit of the purpose of this debate. This is about how we protect our citizens in this country, and how we learn from what has happened with the failure of regulation in our country to protect people in the future and deal with what is happening now for those who have dangerous cladding covering their blocks of flats.

Last summer, after vociferous campaigning, Ministers announced £400 million of funding for urgent fire safety repairs in social housing blocks that are at risk. This is welcome, but it did not come easy. The Grenfell survivors, having been through the most horrific trauma, campaigned with charities, local authorities and Members of Parliament. We had to fight tooth and nail to secure this funding, and it took a year. It should not have taken so long; the Government should have done it immediately. Now, we have to fight tooth and nail for a similar pledge for people to be protected in privately owned blocks. I hope the Minister will say something positive today about additional funding because this has gone on for two years, and it should not be like that.

Of the 345 buildings that I have mentioned are awaiting repairs, 226 are in private hands, and Ministers have done too little to make them safe. Of course, fire does not discriminate between private and public ownership. There is no logic in safeguarding social housing while ignoring private housing. Ministers have said that they expect private building owners to pay for these measures,

although this has been backed only by an appeal to their good will and good nature, rather than stipulating it through legislation. The Government should make this a legal requirement.

Where repairs are being carried out, some private owners, as the Minister is fully aware, are passing on the costs to the people living in the flats as a service charge under the terms of their leases. This can amount to thousands of pounds, and it is simply unacceptable. As we know, freeholders who own these blocks are often in the shadows, obscured by front companies, and under data protection laws they can remain anonymous because of the risk of arson. If there is no law to compel freeholders and no public scrutiny, it is hardly surprising that many will fail to act.

In January, the Minister said that he could guarantee that people in high-rise flats with ACM cladding were safe to sleep at night, but thousands living in flats in high-rise buildings, encased in cladding that could spread fire with rapacious speed, do not feel safe and there is no good night's sleep. The sleepless nights will continue until Ministers get a grip and move fast to take down the cladding.

My local authority, Tower Hamlets, is among those with the highest number of blocks with dangerous ACM cladding in the country: 41 are privately owned blocks, and nine are social housing blocks. Victoria Wharf in my constituency, which has been in the press, has ACM cladding like that at Grenfell. Residents have been charged nearly £7,000 per flat for temporary safety measures, such as 24-hour fire wardens. They are very concerned that no real action has been taken yet, despite the fact that the dangers are well known. The freeholder is Vuillard Holdings, which is registered offshore.

Currently, there are no legal means of forcing the owners to meet their obligations—and if there are any, they are not affordable for my constituents. Perhaps the Government could take legal action against these companies if they are not prepared to legislate to make the companies pay. Time and again, when Ministers have heard the anguished cries of people in this situation, they have offered no solace. Indeed, the Minister for Housing told the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that he was “sorry to be opaque” when he was pressed on making funding available for private ACM-clad plots. I am sorry, too. This evening, instead of being opaque, I hope he will be transparent and demonstrate the urgency of the matter by announcing practical action backed by resources.

Specifically, I ask the Minister to address the following. Will his Department commit to creating new national funding for the removal of dangerous cladding from private blocks, administered by either national or local government? That would mean that works could start straight away. The funding must be additional, given the crisis in local government finance. Will he agree a series of deadlines along a clear timeline to remove all dangerous cladding? Will he amend existing legislation to force freeholders to pay for repairs?

I hope that we are about to hear an action plan about these important issues—making money available now, setting a timetable and making freeholders pay. In last year's Budget, the Chancellor made £420 million of extra funding available to fix potholes. Do not get me wrong: fixing potholes is important—I tripped on one and had an injury—but the issue that we are debating is

[Rushanara Ali]

a matter of life and death for thousands of people up and down the country. For many in my constituency and the constituencies of Members across the House, urgent action is required.

After Grenfell, the Prime Minister said:

“My Government will do whatever it takes to...keep our people safe.”

Two years on, her Government have completely failed to honour that commitment, even when people are living in utter fear and despair for their and their family's safety and are trapped in properties with no end in sight. In fact, I would go as far as to say that if one more fatality like those at Grenfell occurs in a block with ACM cladding because of this Government's failure to act, this Government will be absolutely liable. They will have blood on their hands if they do not take action and if some other disaster happens.

7.43 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), my parliamentary neighbour, on securing this important debate and on representing the plight of her constituents so powerfully. It is a pleasure to follow her.

I am pleased that both the Minister for Housing and the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service have been listening to my hon. Friend's presentation of her issues, and will be listening to the rest of us, who have an opportunity to contribute that was not entirely expected. I am grateful for the chance. There have been a number of opportunities to discuss this issue over recent months. On 9 April, I raised New Providence Wharf in my constituency, and the reluctance of the developer and freeholder, Ballymore, to conform to the Government's expectation that it would cover the costs necessary for fire safety work for residents.

I gently remind the Minister for Housing, for whom I have the highest regard, as I have for the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, that I was promised a written update. I have yet to receive that correspondence. I would be grateful if he ensured that his office got that out for me. My constituents are asking me about it; it is only fair that I pass that on.

I want to mention the *Inside Housing* campaign, “End our Cladding Scandal”. Last Friday, the publication launched a new campaign that calls on the Government to act and end the scandal of residents trapped in private residential blocks with dangerous cladding. The all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform has backed the campaign, as have many MPs, the National Housing Federation, the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Fire Brigades Union and Grenfell United.

The campaign has three main aims: the Government should provide a fund to cover the cost of cladding removal and remedial works on private blocks—as they have, very positively, for the social sector; the Government should set out a firm timescale of no more than two years for the work to be carried out; and residents should be reimbursed for the interim fire safety costs incurred, and funding should be provided for necessary

internal fire safety measures identified by a competent fire risk assessor. Will the Minister comment on that campaign?

Furthermore, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow mentioned in her introduction, the UK Cladding Action Group has conducted a mental, social and physical health survey to support its campaign. Its key findings are that nearly 65% of respondents said that, as a direct result of the ongoing situation, their mental health has been hugely affected. More than 85% stated that their mental health is worse now than it was before the ongoing situation. Almost 70% of live-in leaseholders said that they feel anxious and/or worried daily when they think of their future in relation to the ongoing situation. More than 90% of respondents said that they have money worries. Some 84% said they felt unsupported by the Government, and more than 60% said that they had worries about their family members' safety. Is the Minister aware of this survey, and have the Government given a response?

Finally, the Association of British Insurers has supplied a briefing for this debate. It does not really cover the issue of Government funding for removal of defective material, but it does call for a renewed testing framework, for fire sprinklers for buildings above 18 metres or even 11 metres in height, and for more urgent reassessment of modern methods of construction and building regulations generally, as both Ministers on the Treasury Bench are aware.

This is more than an important issue; as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, it is critical to tens of thousands of our constituents. We are indebted to her for securing this debate, and for giving the Minister another opportunity to state the Government's position. That position is supported across the House, but we want more developers to support what the Government expect them to support.

7.47 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing this really important debate. I remember the morning when I first saw the horrific scene of Grenfell on my television screen; I had been elected only a few days earlier. Those images—the horror of it—were very poignant to me and all of us here, I am sure.

The Government response has just not been good enough—not only the actions there and then, but what has since transpired. I was really horrified by what I saw then and what I have learned since. I do not want that lack of action and slow response to be replicated if such a thing happened again. If this had happened in the Minister's backyard, or perhaps in a safe seat in south-east England, there might have been a very immediate response. I hope that the Minister will think about what will happen from now on to ensure that people living in high-rise buildings are safeguarded and looked after.

That is not what is happening in my constituency of Cardiff North, where I have a few high-rise buildings. The cladding on one of those buildings, Lydstep Flats, was tested shortly after Grenfell and was found to be in breach of fire and safety regulations. Of course, the cladding was immediately taken down, so that the residents could sleep comfortably in their beds at night. Since then, however, the mix of private and Cardiff Council

ownership has meant that there has not been adequate funding to replace the cladding, and the residents are now suffering day in, day out. That has nothing to do with the aesthetics of how the building looks; it is about what it is like to live there. I have visited those flats. There is damp and mould. Many of the flats are horrific. People are living in squalid conditions, and are suffering from mental and physical problems as a result.

One constituent came to me—I have since helped her to move flat—suffering from respiratory and mental health problems. She is really very concerned. Two fantastic local Labour councillors, Dilwar Ali and Jennifer Burke-Davies, have done their utmost to fight for the council to replace the cladding. The council is working very hard to find the funds, and a surveyor is looking at what the cladding needs to be, but there is no central funding from UK Government. We know how cash-strapped councils are. I believe it is for the UK Government to ensure that councils have adequate funding to replace cladding, so that my constituents in Lydstep Flats can sleep soundly at night, do not fear for their safety, and can be healthy, rather than fearful about their health.

7.52 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I commend the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing this important debate. She has written to me on several occasions about this issue, and I congratulate her on her assiduous service to her constituents, as I do other hon. Members who have spoken in the debate.

I want to start by reassuring the House that I am well aware of the anxiety, fear and insecurity, as the hon. Lady put it, felt by many people living in blocks affected by this issue. Having met the UK Cladding Action Group, individuals and organisations from the Grenfell community and others, it is very clear to me that this event and its consequences have caused enormous distress—and there are also the practical issues that she rightly raised in relation to particular properties. I reassure her that much of my time, effort and commitment is spent trying to rectify this awful situation. Further to what the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) alleged about a possibly partial response, I gently point out that Grenfell Tower was in my London Assembly constituency. I served that community and the wider community for eight years. The idea that there would be any lack of commitment from my point of view is, frankly, for the birds.

Before addressing funding, I want to update the House on the wider remediation work under way. In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we established the building safety programme. A key objective of the programme has been to identify and remediate buildings with unsafe ACM cladding. We have collected data on over 6,000 private sector high-rise buildings, and we have identified 267 with unsafe cladding systems. There are plans and commitments in place to remediate 82% of those buildings. That includes buildings on which remediation has started or been completed. That progress is the result of action we have taken to put pressure on building owners and developers to reach a resolution.

In the private sector, we have been very clear that freeholders should do all they can to protect leaseholders from additional costs, by either funding remediation

themselves or looking at alternative routes, such as insurance claims, warranties or legal action. The Secretary of State has written to all relevant building owners, setting out our strong expectation that leaseholders will be protected. He has asked them to find an acceptable solution urgently.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Minister is doing much good work on this issue. He is always very responsive; he exchanged text messages with me on this issue early on Saturday morning. He says he takes nothing off the table, in terms of getting freeholders or developers to pay for this work. He also says that long leaseholders should not be responsible either. Where we cannot find a freeholder or a developer to hold accountable for this work, long leaseholders will be left in limbo; their apartments will be unsellable, and they will live under unacceptable stress. Is it not right for the Government to step in with a central fund to carry out the remediation work, and worry about whether they can find the freeholder or developer afterwards?

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If he will bear with me, I will come on to some of those issues in my speech. If I have not addressed them by the end, he can by all means intervene on me again.

Owing to our continued pressure, following the Secretary of State writing to all building owners, there is a growing list of owners and developers who are agreeing to fund remediation. Leaseholders are currently protected from remediation costs in 83 out of 176 residential buildings. The growing list of owners and developers who have stepped in includes Barratt Developments, Mace Group, Legal & General, Peabody, Aberdeen Asset Management and Frasers Property. I am pleased to say that following regular engagement from the Secretary of State, me and senior officials, the building owners at Green Quarter in Manchester have now written to leaseholders to confirm that a fund has been established. This will ensure that leaseholders will not have to pay for the cost of remediating the ACM. We are very pleased at this outcome. I know residents feel strong relief that the uncertainty and anxiety over costs has come to an end.

We remain concerned, however, that some leaseholders are not yet protected from costs. They have found themselves in this difficult and stressful situation through no fault of their own, having bought their properties in good faith. I would like to assure Members that the Secretary of State and I, as well as senior officials, continue to press owners and developers of all high-rise buildings with unsafe ACM cladding to protect leaseholders from paying for this essential remedial work. Further to that, we have been engaged across Government to consider additional interventions, so that progress can be made more swiftly.

We also want to make sure that leaseholders can access independent initial advice. We have provided funding to the Leasehold Advisory Service, which provides a free, initial service to affected leaseholders. Its dedicated advice line and outreach helps leaseholders to understand their rights and the terms of their leases. The Leasehold Advisory Service has supported a number of affected leaseholders to understand the terms of their leases and the legal process for challenging a building owner if they attempt to pass costs on.

[Kit Malthouse]

On the subject of pace, we are working with all relevant parties, including local authorities and building owners, to ensure remediation happens without unnecessary delay. Remediation does take time and it is important to get it right. The time to complete work varies considerably depending on factors such as structure, extent of cladding and existing fire safety systems. For many buildings, this is a complex job involving major construction work. I am aware that the removal of cladding in a number of buildings has revealed other defects and issues that have complicated matters and needed rectification.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Before he moves off the point about discussions across Government of what further measures they might be able to take, is he able to articulate what they are tonight or will he lay them out in due course to the House?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to press me, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). I am not able to say tonight what specific measures are likely, but I am hopeful that we will be able to do so shortly.

We have worked closely with local authorities and fire and rescue services to ensure that interim safety measures are in place, so that residents are safe in their beds tonight. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow referred to my wanting reassurance that people are safe tonight. In fact, I have ordered a review of all those arrangements to take place as soon as possible, so that I can reassure myself that that is still the case.

Local authorities have the power to enforce these improvements if building owners do not take action. We are backing local authorities to take action where building owners refuse to remediate, including with financial support where it is necessary for the local authority to carry out emergency remedial work. Where financial support is made available, the relevant local authorities will attempt to recover the costs from the building owner.

Rushanara Ali: The Minister referred to “tonight”. Is he saying that every time we manage to get him into this Chamber he can reassure our constituents that they are safe for a night, or does he mean indefinitely, until the work is done? Will he explain how people can be protected against having to pay thousands of pounds towards the fire wardens, because that is happening to my constituents?

Kit Malthouse: As I have explained on numerous occasions, my primary concern, while waiting for the work to be undertaken, is to make sure that interim measures are in place in every affected building, so that people can be reassured that they are safe this evening and until that work is done. It is obviously the responsibility of building owners to make sure that their buildings are safe, but local fire and rescue services have been working closely alongside local authorities to make sure that that certification is in place. I have asked for a review, I guess to satisfy myself that the measures taken over the last few months—whether waking watch or others—are still in place and are still assiduously adhered to.

I met someone recently who outlined that one measure that has been very reassuring for her has been the heat detectors in the rubbish chutes—often flashpoints for the start of fires—that alert the building control system that a fire may well be starting. We want to reassure ourselves that, across those buildings that have not yet been remediated, those interim measures are in place, to reassure people for the moment, while we wait for remediation. I acknowledge that this is not an ideal situation. We want to get the remediation done as quickly as possible.

However, whatever solution is found for these buildings, we have to recognise that these are often complex and difficult construction jobs involving enormous amounts of scaffolding, the procurement of alternative methods of cladding and finding the workforce and contractors to do the work. All of that may well necessarily take some time. However, as I said, local authorities have the power to enforce these improvements, and we have included a package of financial support where it is necessary and local authorities feel the need to step in. We intend to recover those costs from building owners if that is the case.

We established a joint inspection team to provide support to local authorities in ensuring, and where necessary enforcing, that remediation. We have strengthened the housing health and safety rating system and its operating guidance to provide specific guidance on the assessment of high-rise residential buildings with unsafe cladding. That should help local authorities to take action.

The Secretary of State and I also regularly chair a remediation taskforce to oversee progress. I take this opportunity to remind the House of the strong progress we have made in social sector remediation. The Government made £400 million available to social sector landlords to fund the remediation of unsafe aluminium composite material cladding on residential social housing buildings taller than 18 metres. We have so far allocated £259 million, and we are still accepting applications. Remediation has started or been completed in 85% of social sector buildings, and there are plans and commitments in place to remediate all remaining buildings.

I would also like to tell hon. Members about the work we are doing following the Hackitt review. Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, we asked Dame Judith Hackitt to carry out an independent review of building regulations and fire safety. Dame Judith’s review found that the system was not fit for purpose. The review made 53 recommendations to establish a new regulatory framework and achieve a culture change to build and maintain safe buildings. The Government accepted the diagnosis of the independent review and published our implementation plan last December, which set out how we intend to take forward the review’s recommendations.

We committed in the implementation plan to consult on our proposals for a fundamental reform of the building safety system this spring, and we will publish our proposals shortly. Our aim is to put residents at the heart of a more effective system, with clear and more demanding accountability and responsibility for those who design, construct and manage buildings, alongside effective penalties for those who flout the system. We have not waited for legislation to begin to reform the system; we have already made progress. This includes launching consultations to make sure that standards

and guidance are clear, banning combustible cladding on new buildings taller than 18 metres and further restricting desktop studies. We are also launching calls for evidence around approved document B and the role that residents can play in keeping buildings safe. Much of the work to reform the building safety system will require primary legislation, which we have committed to introducing at the earliest opportunity.

We are also making sure that change begins on the ground as soon as possible through our joint regulators group, which is helping us to develop and pilot new approaches and to transition to a new, safer system. An industry early adopters group is trialling aspects of the proposed new regulatory framework in advance of legislation. Industry must also drive culture change by adopting a safety-first mindset and taking greater responsibility for building safety, and we will champion those that do the right thing.

The Grenfell Tower fire represents the greatest loss of life in a residential fire in a century. We must rebuild public trust in the system in tribute to those who lost their lives, the bereaved and the survivors.

Rushanara Ali: This update is helpful, but I bring the Minister back to the points made about resources for privately owned blocks, because that is where the big loophole is. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) mentioned the Government fronting the cost and then going after the people who are liable—the freeholders—to pay. So far the Government have not shown themselves to be on the side of residents caught in this trap, but that is what is needed; the Government need to fight for ordinary people stuck in this position. I would be grateful if the Minister could give me a substantive answer. To do otherwise would suggest the use of a delaying tactic, which is really unhelpful. Frankly, our constituents will not sleep comfortably tonight or any night if it carries on like this.

Kit Malthouse: I do not seek to use any kind of delaying tactic. I cannot give the hon. Lady a specific answer tonight, but I can say, as I said earlier, that conversations are ongoing across Government about what further interventions we can make, because we recognise that the issue needs to be resolved as urgently as possible. In the social sector we are making good progress. In the private sector, progress is slower; I absolutely admit that. We need to do something to speed that up, and we hope to increase the pace quite soon. Discussions are ongoing.

However, I point out that we have said to local authorities that, where they go into a building and assess there to be a category 1 hazard, we will support them to step in and do the work themselves. We have said specifically that we will provide financial support for that to happen. We have amended the HHSRS tool to take into account and appreciate the envelope of a

building, not just houses that are internal. The tools are there for local authorities to step in and take action where they believe there to be an imminent threat to life.

Alongside that, as I say, we have commissioned a wider review to make sure that the measures required to keep people safe on an interim basis are assiduously applied and monitored while we try to sort out the remainder—the tail end—of this unfortunate problem. It has been a difficult and complex landscape—both legally and practically—with which we have had to wrestle, and I hope that we will reach a resolution soon. Pleasingly, as I say, the vast majority of large developers in the industry are stepping forward to play their part, which we should welcome.

Rushanara Ali *rose*—

Kit Malthouse: Given the seriousness of the debate, I will give way again.

Rushanara Ali: Can I ask the Minister once again about the timeframe he has in mind to get a grip on the outstanding issues, particularly with those companies that are not co-operating? Would he consider legislative action—or whatever action the Government can apply—to make them comply? Without the forcefulness of his Department and the entire Government, we are at risk of creating further danger to people's lives.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady should be under no illusion as to the amount of effort, time and commitment we are putting in to resolve this issue. There are meetings, both individual and collective, with companies and residents, and we are very close to the local authority and the community, who are also working hard, alongside us, to reach a resolution. I cannot give her a specific timeframe, but my desire is to get this finished and done as quickly as possible. I have seen the pain and anguish on the faces of people affected—it is very affecting to meet them and to understand what they are living with—and while I fortunately do not live in one of those buildings, it is not hard to put oneself in the position, in particular, of people whose home was their pride and joy and who had made a huge financial commitment. As I say, we are working as hard as we can to get that sorted out.

On that note, I thank hon. Members who have participated in the debate and reassure the House that we take this matter extremely seriously and are applying enormous resources to reach a resolution for all affected residents. Critically, we are determined to learn the lessons of the Grenfell tragedy and to ensure that nothing like it can ever happen again.

Question put and agreed to.

8.10 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 29 April 2019

[JOAN RYAN *in the Chair*]

Online Abuse

[*Relevant documents: First Report of the Petitions Committee, Online abuse and the experience of disabled people, HC 759, and the Government Response, HC 2122.*]

4.30 pm

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that our proceedings are being made accessible for people who are deaf or hearing impaired. The interpreters are using British Sign Language, and parliamentlive.tv will show a live simultaneous interpretation and live subtitling of the debate.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 190627 relating to online abuse.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. The petition was started by Katie Price following the abuse of her son Harvey online. The Petitions Committee set up an inquiry into the subject, throughout which we have been led by the experiences of disabled people. We held an event in Westminster to listen to their experiences and scope out our inquiry, as well as six further events around the country. We took formal evidence from the police, technology companies, charities, the Minister and disabled people themselves, and we published draft recommendations and consulted on them. I think we were the first Select Committee to do so, and we held further events around the country to make that work.

I place on record my thanks to all the people who gave so generously of their time to engage with us, and to the Select Committee staff, who not only worked extremely hard on the inquiry but travelled widely throughout the country to do so. That engagement was very important to us because, despite the fact that other Select Committees have done excellent work on both hate crime and internet safety, we found that the voices of disabled people were often not heard, and that became even clearer to us as the inquiry proceeded.

We found that rather puzzling; after all, disabled people are more likely to be in contact with a range of services—from council services to the Department for Work and Pensions and the health service. They therefore should be easy to contact, although, as one of our witnesses said:

“We're not hard to reach, only easy to ignore.”

That leads to a misunderstanding of what disabled people are facing online, and what their problems really are.

When we asked both the technology companies and the Minister questions about disabled people, we often got answers about children. The Government's Green Paper on internet safety said very little about the experiences of disabled people. When we raised that with the Minister, she kindly wrote to us in April last year saying that the

Government planned to hold a roundtable with disability organisations and social media companies. The only problem with that is that the inquiry closed in December 2017.

Most disabled people are not children; they are adults who are able to make their own choices and decisions, and they deserve to have their voices heard. What we found out when talking to them was truly shocking. Disabled people are less likely to use the internet than the majority of the population but, among those who do, many are avid users. To be frank, the internet has been a boon to many disabled people. It has allowed them to connect with others with similar conditions, which is very important, especially if they have a rare condition. It has allowed them to widen their social circle, progress in their careers, organise, campaign and challenge stereotypes. However, while doing that, they face the most horrendous abuse—not occasionally, but day in, day out.

Such abuse is, frankly, a stain on our society. Disabled people are regularly told that they should have been aborted. They are targeted with requests for explicit images—the implication being that disabled women, in particular, ought to be grateful for any attention. They are told that they are benefit scroungers or fraudsters, and a drain on our society. That leads to a culture of fear among many disabled people who post about their lives online.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Petitions Committee for giving way. She and I worked together on the report, and I commend her for the speech that she is making. Almost all of us in the Chamber know that people say things online that they would never say directly to someone's face. However, one of the most distressing aspects of the report—this was shared with me during one of the outreach events that we held in Newcastle—is that the abuse that disabled people receive online often reflects the abuse that they receive out and about in their daily lives in the real world. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as is set out in a conclusion of the report, the Government need to amend hate crime legislation to ensure that disability hate crime is dealt with on a par with other hate crime offences, to send a very clear message?

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend is exactly right, and I will come to that point later in my remarks.

Online, those with visible disabilities are often mocked for how they look. Those with learning difficulties are targeted for sexual or financial exploitation. Some of the terms used—I will repeat them only to show how vile they are—such as “mong”, “retard” and “spastic”, are as vile as the worst terms of racist abuse; yet they are often not treated in the same way. People even join Facebook groups that disabled people use for support so that they can steal images and transform them into so-called jokes or memes online.

My hon. Friend is entirely right; the disabled people we spoke to were very clear that the abuse that they get online reflects attitudes in society. That is why our report called for more education. We found that 21% of young adults would avoid speaking to a disabled person. Unless we break down those barriers, things will not change. I am sorry that the Government were rather dismissive of that recommendation in their response.

[Helen Jones]

Disabled people were also clear that the abuse had increased since 2010, when certain politicians started to ramp up the rhetoric about benefit fraudsters and scroungers, despite knowing that, even on the worst estimate, benefit fraud is only 1% of the spending. In many estimates, it is less than that. That should be a reminder to everybody that such rhetoric has an impact on real people living their day-to-day lives.

We were clear that part of the way to counter the abuse is to promote more positive images of disabled people. After all, they are 20% of the population, and 19% of the working-age population. They are our friends, neighbours and work colleagues; yet they are seldom visible, either in the media or Government campaigns. That is why we recommended that the Government ensure that there are positive images of disabled people in all their campaigns, events and advertising.

The Government's response says that they used a picture of a disabled person in a campaign on transport because disabled people often have problems with transport. It would be an understatement to say that that comprehensively misses the point. We do not want always to see pictures of disabled people who have problems—indeed, sometimes they themselves are seen as the problem. We want to see pictures of disabled people going about their everyday lives at work, at leisure and contributing to society, as they do.

That kind of misunderstanding is everywhere. It leads to a situation in which disabled people who report abuse are often told to go offline. That is as unacceptable in the 21st century as it would be to tell a black person or a disabled person not to go down the high street in case they get abused. When that happens, disabled people face a double whammy: first, their health is damaged by the constant abuse—Members of this House ought to know how that feels—and then they are denied opportunities that would improve their health, in volunteering or in work, and their social circle is narrowed. For those who are in work, constantly having to change their details to avoid abuse leads to loss of employment opportunities or promotion.

We cannot do anything about this problem until we start to understand it, but people do not. For example, we became aware during our inquiry that a lot of the abuse related to football, with people using disability terms as insults. Shockingly and appallingly, they were using the name of Harvey Price, who is a child and a football fan, to insult someone on their ability as a footballer. We wrote to the footballing organisations—the Professional Footballers Association, Kick It Out, the Football Association, the Premier League and the English Football League—but only one replied before our inquiry concluded. The Premier League's reply was about access to football grounds and abuse at the grounds—it just did not get it. It is shocking that some of those organisations did not reply at all; it is shameful, in fact, because clubs and footballers have a great influence on their fans. I hope that in future they will use their position to call out hatred of disabled people in the same way that they have rightly called out racism associated with the game.

It is that lack of understanding that leads to disabled people being categorised as children and to their voices not being heard. We have therefore recommended that in future the Government should consult disabled people

explicitly and directly on all matters that concern them—not those who claim to speak on their behalf, but disabled people themselves.

We were bemused about why social media companies have failed to engage with people who could be among their strongest advocates. What engagement there has been has come too late and has often been too little. For example, where people with learning difficulties are concerned, Facebook told us that it thought its how-to videos made easy-read guidelines unnecessary, while Google said that it thought its community guidelines met the easy-read guidelines. Disabled people disagreed: they do not.

Twitter told us that it thought that simplifying its policies would make them harder to understand, yet easy-read versions are frequently produced of complex documents such as health consultations, tenancy agreements and even—dare I say it—Select Committee reports. It is not that the guidance and expertise needed to produce easy-read versions are not available; it is that social media companies have never thought to seek that guidance and act on it.

We also found that most disabled people, like the rest of us, were confused by the fact that policies are called different things on different sites. Even more importantly, reporting mechanisms are often not accessible to disabled people. Shockingly, we heard again and again that when disabled people have reported hate speech, often nothing has been done.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and is setting out some really unbelievable issues that need to be taken on board and tackled to protect disabled people online and offline. Does she agree that some of the issues result from the fact that the legislation that covers these crimes is so old? I see from the Library briefing that the most recent applicable legislation is from 1997, and some of it goes back to 1861. That is not to say that it is not good or appropriate legislation, but it is clear that our legislative guidelines are so out of date that they cannot take into consideration the modern world and the challenges that disabled people face online.

Helen Jones: The hon. Lady makes a very valid point. I will move on to legislation shortly.

Our inquiry has led us to conclude that social media companies do not employ enough moderators, or enough suitably trained moderators, to deal with this abuse. Given how much profit they are making, that is frankly scandalous. We also found that there is a lot of confusion about what is the responsibility of social media companies and what is the responsibility of the police. That confusion is often fed by the social media companies themselves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Helen Jones: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but then I must make progress.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for making a very passionate and capable speech. Does she agree that perhaps we need someone to be a spokesperson for disabled people online, in a similar way to what has been done for racism and hate crime? Does she feel that perhaps the online companies should set aside a figure

such as 1% of their earnings to address the issue? Maybe it is because online abuse as a result of racism and hate seems to be—I use the word very loosely—“sexy”, whereas abuse of disabled people is not. We need someone to be a spokesperson; does the hon. Lady agree that we should set somebody aside for that purpose?

Helen Jones: Whether there should be a particular person charged with that is one issue, but I think disabled people are well able to speak for themselves about this, and have been doing so when people choose to hear them.

Social media companies should certainly do more. For example, we found that Twitter talks about dealing with threats of violence by removing an offending tweet or suspending an account, but nowhere does it say that threats to kill are a serious criminal offence and should be reported to the police. That in itself is breeding confusion. We often found that the police were having to pick up things that should really have been dealt with by social media companies. We think it quite wrong that police resources should have to be used in that way because the social media companies are failing.

Social media companies need clear rules, policies, mechanisms and settings that are accessible to all disabled people. They also need to be much more proactive in removing hate speech from their sites and reporting potential criminal offences, including the theft of images, which was one of the worst things that we found—particularly images of children that were used to create so-called memes or jokes.

Rightly, the Government’s White Paper on online harms commits to imposing a duty of care on social media companies and making them responsible for harmful or illegal content on their sites. However, the document refers repeatedly to

“children and other vulnerable users”.

We must understand that many disabled people resent the categorisation of all disabled people as vulnerable. They are not. Like the rest of us, some are vulnerable and some are not. Mostly, they are disadvantaged by how society treats them, rather than by the intrinsic nature of their condition. I hope that the Minister’s reply will reassure us that those things will apply to all kinds of abuse.

What is very clear is that self-regulation has comprehensively failed disabled people in the same way that it has failed many other people who use the internet. Unfortunately, so has the law, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) pointed out. The Government tell us constantly that what is illegal offline is illegal online. That is true as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. There are potentially 30 statutes that could apply to online offences. Some offences, such as the theft of images or instigating pile-ons, can occur only online.

The fact that, as one of our witnesses put it,

“not all the pieces of the jigsaw join up”

is leading to a low rate of prosecution in this area. If the law cannot deal with the creation of fake child pornography to mock a disabled child and his family, as happened in the case of Harvey Price, it is simply inadequate. We need a new law that is fit for the digital age, which is why

we have recommended that the Government bring forward legislation as a matter of urgency and consult disabled people before doing so.

The Government should make disability hate crime an offence in the same way that crime against someone due to their race or religion is an offence. At the moment, it is only an aggravating factor at sentencing, and it is necessary to prove that someone committed a crime because of hostility to someone due to their disability, which is a very high threshold. Both the Crown Prosecution Service and Detective Inspector John Donovan of the Metropolitan police’s online hate crime hub pointed us to the research by the University of Sussex, which shows that disability hate crime was under-reported and under-prosecuted due to the current state of the law.

In their White Paper, the Government include hate crime in a list of harms that they say are clearly defined. I am afraid that it is not clearly defined on disability hate crime, and it urgently needs to be. As our inquiry proceeded, it became clear to us that disabled people do not feel adequately protected by the law, and do not feel that they are heard when they report crimes. People not being heard properly was a recurring theme throughout our inquiry.

Some good work has been done at senior levels of the police and the CPS, but the law will not work properly unless that percolates down through the organisations, and unless the person on the desk in the police station or the officer who comes out to see people understands it. That is why we have recommended more training for police officers, including in dealing with people who have learning disabilities or autism, so that they are not automatically pigeonholed as being unreliable witnesses.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. From the most appalling case in my constituency—the abuse and murder of Lee Irving—I know that so-called mate crime is an enormous danger, particularly for people with learning disabilities. The phrase does not adequately describe in any way the serious financial, physical and often sexual exploitation faced by far too many disabled people at the hands of those they are led to believe are their friends. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that although many disabled people can feel isolated in the real world, the friendships that they develop on social media platforms can actually pose a real danger and harm? Social media companies do not have a grip on this, and the legislation does not reflect the seriousness of such offences.

Helen Jones: I agree. We say in our report that “mate crime is hate crime”,

and it should be treated as such. There is a real risk to people from the activities of those vile individuals who target them for exploitation.

We have been asked, and were asked in the petition, whether we thought that a separate register of offenders was necessary for online hate crime. We came to the conclusion that there is no need for a separate register if our suggested changes to the law and to disability hate crime legislation are to be instigated, because those crimes would show up through a normal Disclosure and Barring Service check. We should make it very clear that at the moment, they do not. Often it records the offence but not that it was motivated by hatred of a

[Helen Jones]

disabled person. In organisations that are employing someone to deal with disabled people, there is a problem with being unable to check whether they have a record of not instigating any hate crime. That is a real problem, which we think needs to be addressed by changes in the law.

The other thing that we encountered and felt very strongly about during our inquiry was the fact that disabled people do not feel adequately protected by the law, as I said. We were so concerned that we recommended in our report that the Government should commission an overarching review of disabled people's experiences of the law, including their experiences of reporting crime and giving evidence.

Disabled people are already marginalised by society. They are being marginalised even more by being abused or driven away from one of the key tools of the 21st century: the internet. That really cannot carry on, and I hope the Minister will commit to consulting disabled people on the proposals in the White Paper, just as I hope she will commit to ensuring that internet and social media companies consult them on their policies, settings and so on. In my view, saying simply that that is an example of good practice is not strong enough. We need to ensure that it will happen, because time and again it is clear that disabled people are not heard when they raise issues that concern them. They are not heard when they talk about this kind of abuse, which they get all the time on the internet. It is time that they were fully heard, and that we grasped this issue and did something about it. I hope the Minister will commit to doing that today.

4.56 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome this debate and am grateful to the Petitions Committee for ensuring that it happened. I endorse a great deal of what the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), the Chair of the Committee, said. I know that she and her fellow Committee members have pursued this issue with great diligence on behalf of the petitioners.

My interest in the matter is that Katie Price, who organised the petition, is a constituent of mine, as is Katie's mother, Amy, who is watching the debate from the Public Gallery. I have just met Katie and Amy again, having had a number of discussions with them about what motivated them to bring the issue to public attention. The terrible online bullying of Katie's disabled son, Harvey, and the effect it had on him and on Katie and her family, made her determined to raise the profile of the issue. She was told that, as a public figure, she should expect to take the rough with the smooth, that she should have a thicker skin, that she had asked for trouble through many of the things she had said, and that she therefore had no justification for raising the issue. That seems to miss the point entirely. Whether someone is a public figure, or members of their family are public figures, and whether they have been brought into the public eye by accident or design, it is never justifiable to bully a young person. It is especially unjustifiable to bully a young disabled person who cannot answer back and might be particularly vulnerable to such bullying.

This issue is so important because it draws attention to a new form of bullying and a new means of enabling bullying. Bullying has been around as long as the human race, but it has been enabled, amplified and in many ways made a great deal worse by social media. We all recognise that the law, and the way we deal with the issue, has not kept up with the growth of the problem in our society in recent years. As recently as two decades ago we simply would not have been talking about this as an issue. Online bullying has exploded because of the prevalence of social media. There is a common recognition that we must do something about it; the real question is what?

There are four areas that we must look at, accepting that the problem is very great indeed—we do not need to discuss whether it is or not. The Law Commission has said that

“in 2017 28% of UK internet users were on the receiving end of trolling, harassment or cyberbullying.”

That is a huge proportion of the population. The question is: how can we deal with it, particularly when it does not cross the line between activity that is clearly criminal and activity that is sub-criminal but nevertheless needs to be dealt with?

Although the Law Commission's November 2018 report stated that

“we do not consider there to be major gaps in the current state of the criminal law concerning abusive and offensive online communications,”

it then gave the very important caveat that

“there is considerable scope to improve the criminal law in this area”.

It made a number of recommendations on how offences, particularly those relating to grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or false communication, should be tightened up. I hope that the Minister will explain how the Government intend to respond to those recommendations.

The Law Commission noted that there are several practical and cultural barriers to enforcement. That is the second issue. The first is whether the law itself is adequate. Even if the law is correctly framed to deal with online abuse—as I have said, there are areas where it needs improving—the real question is whether it is being effectively enforced. There is little doubt that the law enforcement authorities have struggled with how to deal with the huge explosion of social media. The Law Commission noted:

“the sheer scale of abusive and offensive communications, and the limited resources...a persistent cultural tolerance of online abuse”—

I will come to that—the need to balance protecting individuals from harm and freedom of expression; technical barriers that make it difficult to prove the identity of perpetrators; and jurisdictional issues in a highly globalised world. Those are all reasons why it might be hard to enforce the law, but that does not mean that we should not make greater efforts to do so.

I want to raise the question of whether the police are adequately structured, and whether the resources are sufficiently following the need for them to deal with this activity. There is no doubt that crime is changing—this is a very good example of that. The police always need more resources, and I am aware that the Government have recently been increasing police resources, but does the current structure of policing make it easy for individual

forces to deal with issues such as online crime? Would this kind of crime be better dealt with through some kind of collaborative police activity, or even some radically new police organisation at national level? Is it an example of a kind of crime that should make us look again at the structure of policing, even while we maintain individual police forces across the country for other forms of volume crime? It is worth looking at that, because I think there is a capability issue in relation to how the police deal with these problems, as well as a resources issue.

The second point, therefore, is that we must enforce the existing law more effectively, and it must be enforced just as much online as it is offline. The police and prosecutors often have difficult decisions to make about where the line should be drawn and when it is in the public interest to prosecute. They must make those decisions after having investigated these crimes properly. We cannot have a general absence of investigation simply because the issues are so great that the police feel unable to deal with them.

The third area where we need more action is the responsibility of social media companies to police their own platforms. That is clearly today's zeitgeist. Gone are the days when those companies could simply say that they are merely publishing platforms and that they do not have the ability or the responsibility to deal with offensive conduct. They do. Although much of the focus is on material that poses a serious threat to the public—it is quite proper that social media companies are under enormous pressure to deal with that—they should also not tolerate hateful content any more than a conventional publisher would in their organs.

We are entitled to expect social media companies to do more to deal with the persistent trolling of people and to ensure that reports of such activity are investigated effectively. We must face down those who say that there should be free speech in this area, that we should all have broad shoulders, and that it is not the role of social media companies to act as police officers. Actually, they do have a responsibility in this area. We cannot allow the world wide web to be some kind of wild west where anything goes. The way these platforms are being used is doing great harm, particularly to young people's mental health and happiness.

Those who are making money out of these immensely popular social platforms—we all use them, and they do bring a lot of pleasure and happiness to millions of people—must also recognise the ways in which they can be abused. They must take action to deal with that. The action they take must address conduct that is not just criminal and dangerous, but hateful. They have a responsibility to act, big though the problem is. The Government's online harms White Paper is a step in the right direction. I reject those who say that it represents too much interference in free speech. It is about ensuring that the companies behave like responsible publishers and in a way that we would expect newspapers to behave.

The fourth area—I will conclude on this—is talked about less. It relates to civil society itself and our responsibility to encourage a discourse that is civil, respectful and not hateful. All those who lead in society, not least Members of Parliament, must say that there are ways of speaking to people that are no more acceptable simply because it is in an online discussion than they

would be if it were a face-to-face discussion. We appear to be living in an angrier society, in which it is acceptable to abuse people, and in which licence is taken with a lot of angry outbursts on social media. It may be true that public figures should have broader shoulders, but when such comments spill over into bullying, particularly of younger people, they should not be tolerated.

We must take action collectively; we cannot just leave it to law enforcement. We cannot just toughen up the law and demand more of law enforcement agencies and social media companies. Those things must happen, but we also have a responsibility in society to take a step back and say, "Actually, some of the ways in which we are discussing issues has gone too far; it is too angry and hateful, and language should be moderated." People who use excessive language and do not behave in a civilised way should be called out. If we ourselves are not behaving in that way, we cannot call out those who are doing that.

Those are the four areas where action is needed. Action in one area will not be sufficient. This really is not just about changing the law, important though some changes will be. It is not just about law enforcement; it is also about the responsibility of the social media companies and society at large. We will tackle this problem only by acting across the board. Let us not lose sight of the importance of dealing with it.

I pay tribute to Katie for having the courage to raise the issue, for facing down those who have criticised her for doing so, and for securing the Petition Committee's investigation and report into online abuse. I hope that she keeps going and recognises that she is making progress. Her concern is, although we talk a lot, what progress will be made? That is a legitimate question for any member of the public to ask. We have these debates, but what will actually happen as a consequence?

I will finish by quoting words from Katie's petition, which are powerful and speak for themselves:

"Help me to hammer home worldwide that bullying is unacceptable whether it's face to face or in an online space."

Surely we can all agree with that.

5.10 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I will take a few minutes to talk about the absolutely wonderful work of a rather new organisation called Glitch, which draws attention to the absolute blight of online abuse that my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) spoke about so powerfully.

Glitch has highlighted some of the facts that demonstrate how urgent a matter online abuse is. As we all know, last year's consultation from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport found that four in 10 people had been affected by abuse and that globally, women are 27 times more likely to be affected by abuse, while women of colour face yet more abuse on top of that. Glitch was founded by Seyi Akiwowo, who I am proud to call a friend. I have known her for about 10 years, and first met her at her sixth-form college. She did work experience in my office, and with that experience, become the youngest local councillor in Newham. I am proud to say that she now regularly visits Parliament to talk to us about her experiences and what she does, and also visits other Parliaments and the United Nations.

[Lyn Brown]

Glitch was founded because of Seyi's personal experience and the experiences of many others who have suffered abuse online. Such abuse could easily have driven them out of online spaces entirely; destroyed their mental health; and ended their careers before they had even started. To be honest, that could have happened to Seyi when she first put a tentative toe in the waters of politics. A video of her speaking at the European Parliament was reposted on Twitter and became a magnet for really vile racist and sexist abuse.

Seyi is an amazingly talented young black woman who dared to participate, and she was abused online in such an appalling way. She was called the n-word. Obviously, there were death threats. There was appalling misogyny. The trolls absolutely delighted in referring to female genital mutilation, rape, and even lynching. Of course, Seyi was distraught, but being who she is, she decided to do something about it. That was when she learned how poor the support for people who are being abused can be and how long it can take for anyone to do anything about it.

I remember clearly the day that Seyi rang me to let me know what was happening. I remember her calling and telling me how she felt violated and let down. She was so angry, but proud. I remember how I felt: I was absolutely furious, and I was so much more furious about being completely and utterly impotent when I tried to get the abuse taken down. I am a vocal, committed, determined and clear MP. Anybody who has heard me advocate on behalf of constituents knows that I can be clear, yet I could not get that abuse taken off the internet, and it went on for days. My office and I repeatedly phoned Twitter to try to get the trolls taken down.

Seyi was rightly determined not to let that keep happening to others unchallenged, so she founded Glitch and has helped to ensure that the issue that we are discussing is recognised as urgent and receives an urgent response from the Government. Glitch has some clear and sensible asks, three of which I will highlight.

First, Glitch points out that although legal reform through the White Paper on online harms and beyond is welcome, no law will do the job unless it can be enforced. We therefore need a sustained commitment to training and funding our police teams properly so that they can expand the work that they do currently.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Much social media abuse is organised in secret and closed groups. The trolls then dogpile and harass people, and it sometimes takes a physical form, when employers are contacted, for example. The police do not have specialist teams or the legal force to deal with that. Should that not be taken up as part of the legislation?

Lyn Brown: My hon. Friend is right. When I was shadow Minister of State for Policing, I visited police forces that raised that issue, and they talked about how they just do not have the resources to deal with it. They also talked to me about how that type of abuse is totally organised and is not something that just happens randomly. There are little offline cabals of bad people who collude and conspire together to troll and show hatred, misogyny, racism, you name it—the kind of things that our communities

can well do without. Yes, we absolutely need to fund our police and give them the tools that they need to enforce our laws.

Glitch also argues that the prevention of abuse should be put first, which means a digital citizenship education. That is something that Glitch is involved in, to empower young people to interact positively and safely with others online. There is evidence of the impact of that strategy in Australia and from organisations such as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. If the Minister is interested, there is proper evidence out there, and all we have to do is look at what has worked elsewhere, so that we can import the best of it. Frankly, we need it.

Finally, Glitch is one of more than 100 organisations that are campaigning for just 1% of the new digital services tax to be used to support the work of diverse civil society groups. An extra £4 million for that work would not change the face of the internet overnight, but I am sure that we all agree that it would build capacity and world-leading expertise. I honestly think that that would be a great investment in a flourishing digital economy, in healthier communities and in a healthier democracy. I hope that the Minister will respond to those three requests specifically.

Amazing young people like Seyi have grown up with the internet, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North rightly said in her excellent contribution, online spaces are too often filled with abuse that simply would not be tolerated in other public spaces. By treating the online world like the wild west for so long and refusing to get to grips with the difficult questions about regulation, we in this place have let those people down. Online abuse has to stop and we have to stop it.

5.19 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. My thanks to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and the Petitions Committee for securing this important debate.

Social media has its pros and cons. It permits persons who may not be so mobile to stay in touch and therefore prevents social isolation, giving access to a wider world though, sadly, not necessarily a safer or kinder one. Others may use social media to seek support and/or friendship, frequently from those in similar circumstances to themselves. That commonality could be disability, illness, bereavement, historic abuse and so on, and many will have positive experiences and move on.

Unfortunately, however, those are already potentially at-risk groups, and some people will inevitably encounter those who wickedly seek to exploit them when they are at their lowest ebb. Indeed, social media may create further social isolation for those who fall foul of unscrupulous users. It can be heartbreaking for a victim, who might become withdrawn and fearful over time. A sad indictment of our so-called progressive society is that online trolls—people who seek to gain personal gratification by berating and belittling others—seem to have free rein to do so unabated. There is little in the way of up-to-date and robust regulation to minimise if not eradicate such inhumanity—which is indeed what it is—and at times criminality.

A recent Petitions Committee report recognised a need for Government and social media companies to consult disabled users proactively, and for those companies

to be more proactive about accepting responsibility—which they find very difficult—for facilitating such fractious and foul material being aired on their sites. The Government were required to acknowledge a need to enhance legal protections with a review of the justice system to ensure that disabled persons are not being disadvantaged. I welcome such progress and the publication of the Government's White Paper on online harms, which contains positive and progressive proposals to appoint an independent regulator to draft and enforce stringent new standards, guidance and code of practice to cover dealing with hateful and offensive content online; and to introduce a mandatory duty of care to be adhered to by technology companies, including social media platforms.

I understand that the existing action plan for tackling hate crime will also be revisited and refreshed to ensure that it adequately addresses the totally unacceptable abusive behaviour online, behaviour which knows no bounds and, regrettably, has been experienced by those of different ages, genders—including a number of female MPs—races and religions. Indeed, every walk of life can be affected by the tentacles of online abuse. Now, the focus of those misguided, shameful and wicked individuals is to target those with disabilities, people who already do not feel valued or protected by the law.

Three hundred and eighty-six people in my constituency signed the petition that led to this debate. I ask the Minister to confirm clearly that the Government will, as a matter of urgency, build on the good work already commenced to protect children online, expanding it to encompass the protection of other targeted groups, in particular the disabled. Also, as mentioned previously, will appropriate funding be provided? There is no point having a policy, a law or a rule that does not have the support of funding, whether for the police or for other agencies, including the platform providers, to enable them to continue to operate their secure reporting mechanisms, such as the police's True Vision website. This is an issue that has to be addressed throughout the United Kingdom. It is intolerable, we are aware of it, and self-policing and self-regulation have not worked over the past decade; it is time for firm, robust regulation that will be adhered to by the platform providers.

5.24 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ryan, and to speak in this debate. I pay tribute to Katie Price and her work. It is fantastic to see her mother Amy in the Public Gallery—I know we are not supposed to refer to folk there, but I think it is okay to break the rule sometimes. It is also fantastic to see that we have a British Sign language interpreter. That language is one of the most beautiful in the world, literally bringing language to life. To see simultaneous interpretation here in the Westminster Hall Chamber is fantastic. I hope that the House authorities will consider it for all our debates, including in the main Chamber, and that the Minister will respond to that in due course.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones). She and I are becoming season ticket holders, which is what one of my colleagues calls us regulars here in Westminster Hall. The reality is that while Brexit rages on, little else is in the public psyche or even in the main Chamber, so Westminster Hall is really the place where we are discussing and tackling the other big issues of the day.

Online harms, online bullying and bullying of people whether they are disabled, LGBT, women or from our trans community are totally unacceptable. The report produced by the hon. Lady's Committee is outstanding and I hope that the Government take the recommendations seriously. She went through them in specific detail, but the statement that stood out for me was on the feelings of disabled people about their lack of representation—that we are not hard to find but we are easy to ignore—and it should shame us all that that is how so many disabled people feel.

Hon. Members have referred to intersectionality. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) made particular reference to it, and to the work of Seyi who worked in her office and of Seyi's company, Glitch. That is particularly stark. I regularly meet members of the LGBT disabled community, and they say that women who are LGBT and disabled are some of the most marginalised people, not just online but offline.

The fact that the Committee consulted tech firms, police and disabled people—across the whole spectrum of stakeholders—is to be commended. The lack of response or the poor response of football teams and that sector in general gives me a sense of deep shame. As the SNP's digital, culture, media and sports spokesperson, I care passionately about diversity in sport. I am a passionate football fan and occasional player, but it is clear to me that a lot of online abuse comes from football fans. Katie and Harvey have obviously felt that keenly, and it is so disgusting. We absolutely need to get to the heart of that; we need to name and shame those clubs.

To be fair, I know—in particular in Scotland but across the UK—that many clubs do a lot of positive work to tackle abuse and online harm, but we must do more. We must hold teams to account, because clearly many football fans hide behind the guise of their online profiles to spread vile abuse, driving many people offline. They give the vast majority of football fans a bad name—the reality is that the vast majority are peaceful, decent folk who just want to support their team, whether in the stadiums or online.

Poor responses from Government are disappointing, and I want to believe that the Minister and her Government can do better, so while I may disagree with them in many areas and feel let down by them on many counts, their White Paper on online harms was hugely ambitious and a massive step in the right direction. We in the SNP and in the Scottish Government very much support its intentions. We would like to see it go further, and the intentions and the suggestions in the Committee report are particularly significant.

I refer specifically to recommendation 18 of the report, about how

“social media companies be required to demonstrate that they have consulted and worked in partnership with disabled people themselves”.

The hon. Member for Warrington North spoke passionately about that. I suggest—I wonder whether she and the Minister will consider this—that we talk specifically to those tech firms about quotas in the jobs that do the monitoring and regulating online. I saw a piece in the media fairly recently about how moderators were having a particularly difficult time due to being harmed by the content that they were having to moderate. We all know that in police forces across the UK, people who deal

[*Hannah Bardell*]

with online paedophilia, pornography and all those kinds of issues do those jobs for specific periods of time only.

I am not clear how much transparency there is about the profile of moderators and their range of backgrounds, but it stands to reason that if there are more people who are disabled, LGBT and from the BAME community, they will bring their specific perspectives to the moderation of content. That is the same principle that the Government brought forward to get companies to publish their gender pay gaps. Although the legislation had flaws, it has been quite effective from a societal perspective because it has made companies stop and think carefully about what they need to do and the profile of the people they employ. That would be a sensible way forward and something that perhaps we can encourage tech companies to get behind.

The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) paid tribute to his constituents Katie and Harvey Price and Katie's mother, Amy. Katie has put her head above the parapet. The notion that people in public life, whether celebrities, politicians or whoever else, should just suck it up is a piece of nonsense. As politicians, we deserve to be criticised and critiqued. We expect robust criticism and debate, but we do not expect—and neither should any celebrity or a member of their family—to be routinely abused and persecuted. There has been persecution of Katie and her son Harvey, which cannot continue. I commend her work, and we in the SNP and other across the House will do everything we can to help.

The right hon. Gentleman also referred to the inadequacy of legislation and policing resources. We have to look at police budgets and the resources that we allocate. The digital world has brought a massive change to the challenges of cyber-crime and the online world. People want police to be on the street. A close member of my family is a local bobby; we commend our police forces and officers, who do an incredibly difficult job, but we have to remember where the threats are and make sure that the police are properly resourced and supported.

Similarly, as I mentioned in my intervention on the hon. Member for Warrington North, legislation is piecemeal and all over the place. We need to take a holistic look at the legislative framework to make sure that it properly tackles the bullying of disabled people or anyone from any group online and offline. I hope the Minister will take the report seriously. It concerns me that, although Committees of the House do fantastic work and put a huge amount of time and effort into reports, quite often those reports are put on a shelf and left to gather dust. The actions suggested and all the work involved are not taken forward. For the sake of Katie, Harvey and every disabled person or anyone else who is abused online, I hope that this report will not be put on a shelf to gather dust. I hope that the Minister will take it very seriously and will enact the sensible recommendations in it.

5.34 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I, too, congratulate Katie Price and her family on bringing forward the petition. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for an

outstanding speech to introduce the debate. It was brilliant because it was based on a thorough analysis of the petition. It is good to see the Petitions Committee working in exactly the way that it should.

I do not want to say too much, because our position on how to tackle this problem has been rehearsed with the Minister a number of times over the last year and a half, but there are three or four things that I want to put on the record. First, it is worth remembering that the scale of abuse is staggering. Three quarters of people with learning disabilities and autism say that they have been victims of hate crime. That is a comprehensive failure as a society and a country to keep our neighbours safe. God knows what sacrifices we have made over the last 50 or 60 years in the defence of democracy and free speech. We live in a country where some of our neighbours are hounded out of those privileges; we have to look at ourselves and conclude that we have so much more to do.

The policing environment for online hate is failing comprehensively. There is a very old concept in policing known as keeping the Queen's peace. Online, the Queen's peace is simply not observed. I disagree slightly with the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) because it is simply inconceivable ever to expect a police force to police this waterfront. Some time ago, people started producing memes of what goes up online every 60 seconds. As far back as 2017, the statistics were half a million tweets, 500 hours of video and 3.3 million Facebook posts. There is no way any police force on earth will police that waterfront and keep it safe and sound to protect and preserve the Queen's peace throughout that space. Therefore, we have to put the onus back on some of the most profitable companies on earth.

In the last reported quarter, Facebook made something like £5 billion of net earnings. That means that in the course of this debate, it will have made more than £3 million of profit. It is one of the biggest and most valuable companies on earth, yet it gets away with supporting—not orchestrating or colluding in, but certainly enabling—the abuse of fellow citizens of our society. The time has to come when we say to the wealthiest titans on earth, "Enough is enough."

Nick Herbert: The right hon. Gentleman should not traduce what I said. I was quite clear that action needed to be taken across the board, and that social media companies had to accept responsibility. I did not say or seek to imply that the police could police the range of abusive comments across social media. Where they trespass into the criminal, law enforcement agencies do have a responsibility to act, and we need to ensure that they are capable of doing so.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful for that because I believe we are on the same page. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the police forces in this country will need to be radically reconfigured. The time when a police constable might turn up to a burglary and advise how to target harden the home should be about to go, because the cyber-security of the property and the family in question will often be much more important. At the moment, however, in Birmingham we cannot get police to investigate even violent abuses because there are no police—they have been cut in the west midlands to the smallest number since the force was created in 1974. That is a debate for another day.

Four significant changes need to happen to the online regulatory and policing environment. I think the Government have accepted the first: there needs to be a duty of care on social media companies. The concept of duty of care is quite well established in law. Its legal tradition goes back to the early 1970s and it is tried and tested. If I went out and built a stadium here in London and filled it full of people, there would be all kinds of rules and regulations that would ensure that I kept those people safe. If I went out and built a similar online stadium and filled it full with all kinds of nonsense, no such regulations would bite on me. That has to change. We have to ask these firms to identify the harms their services and products might cause and to do something about them, and we have to hold them to account for that.

The second idea is much tighter regulation of hate speech, which the Government have not yet accepted the need to look into. We have raised a number of times in debates like this the approach taken by the Ministry of Justice in Germany. Its Network Enforcement Act—or NetzDG law for short—has created a much more effective policing environment for tackling online hate speech, and it has done so in a way that keeps Germany well within its Council of Europe obligations on protecting free speech. It is time we looked at that because, as the report that has come through from the German Ministry of Justice shows, it is beginning to work.

I am told that something like one in seven Facebook moderators now works in Germany. Google, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have had to take down a significant amount of hateful material. Looking across the Council of Europe space at the countries that are signatories to the European convention on human rights, which includes the protection of free speech, it appears that Germany is leading the way in creating an effective policing environment to tackle hate speech. Surely, it is time for the Government to look at that a little harder.

The third thing we need is a different kind of regulator. Again, I think the Government have accepted that. There are something like nine different regulators with some kind of regulatory, policing or overwatch powers in the internet space. That is too many. We are not saying they need to be boiled down to one, but that number needs to be closer to one than to nine. That means we have to overhaul the regulators, so we are looking forward to seeing a new Bill whenever we see the Queen's Speech and a new legislative programme for the next Session.

The final change we need, which is more long term, is a bill of digital rights for the 21st century. The reality is that the online world is going to be regulated, re-regulated and re-regulated again over the course of this century. It is therefore important that we set down some first principles that provide something of a north star to guide us and give companies a bit more predictability as we navigate the changes ahead. At the core of that bill of digital rights should be the right to universal digital literacy. Ultimately, as a country, we are all going to have to become more digitally literate so we can start putting back in place some of the norms and boundaries of the civilised discourse that once were the hallmark of democracy in this country.

5.42 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the Petitions

Committee on its impressive work. I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) for her speech and for leading that work on the Committee's report. I assure her that the Government take this issue extremely seriously. I echo her thanks and congratulations to Katie Price and her family on the crusading work they have done. They should never have had to do it in the first place, but they were courageous enough to confront these awful issues on behalf of her son, Harvey.

I have been very affected by the things I have heard in the debate. I had heard some of them before, but some of the content of the debate was new to me, and it is all very shocking. The purpose of the debate has been to look at the effect of horrendous abuse on people with disabilities. Although, obviously, it has not been confined to people with disabilities, until this petition and the Committee's report, there had not been enough exposure of the true extent of the abuse of people with disabilities.

The hon. Lady alluded to the advice to go offline, which seems to have been handed out to many people with disabilities who have been abused online. That is outrageous advice. No, they should not go offline. She made clear the tremendous benefits that the internet has brought people with disabilities. They should be free to access those benefits, and to come and go online like everybody else, without fear of harassment, abuse or intimidation. It is the internet that has to change, not the experience of people with disabilities.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) has done an excellent job representing the Price family, who are his constituents. He is quite right that this awful abuse and bullying has been with us since the dawn of humanity, but unfortunately, since the dawn of the internet, which is a recent phenomenon, it has been amplified and made far worse. The 24/7 nature of the internet, and the speed and ease with which images and abusive content can be replicated around the world at the touch of a button, have made the phenomenon of abuse—we are here to talk particularly about the abuse of people with disabilities—far worse. I quite agree that social media platforms should operate a policy of zero tolerance of hate speech, and I will come on to the steps that we are taking through the online harms White Paper to ensure that they do that.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned something I know very well: that women are 27 times more likely than men to receive abuse online. There is a lot of research to back that up. I echo her congratulations to her constituent Seyi and the campaign organisation she founded, Glitch. That was a very courageous move to overcome the awfulness of what she had to cope with online and actually do something about it. If we are going to do something about abuse, we have to confront it, so I congratulate Seyi.

Some of the proposals that Glitch has developed on digital citizenship and digital literacy are very important. There is a section in our White Paper devoted to improving digital literacy, and not just among young people but among the general population—for us all—and particularly with regard to children as they are growing up. That is very important. The hon. Member for West Ham suggested that the proposed measures could be funded from the digital services tax. I am sure that we can ask the Chancellor those questions, but the White Paper proposes that the regulator should be funded via a levy on companies, which would be a similar source of income.

Lyn Brown: I am delighted to hear what the Minister has just said, and I know that Glitch will be, too. Should she launch a quiet campaign—we know that is how politics is often done—in the Treasury and DCMS to ask for better enforcement and whether we can take a percentage of the money from the digital services tax, she will find that she has friends on the Labour Benches, and we will do our best to give more power to her elbow.

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady very much for her support. It is very important that we work across parties in this area. We have welcomed the Labour party's input to these deliberations, and some of the ideas that it put forward found their way into the White Paper.

Hannah Bardell: I will follow on from that intervention, because the Minister will also find friends on the SNP Benches. It is important that we work cross-party to challenge the big tech firms. Given that a former Member of this place is now in a very senior role in Facebook, I would like to think that it understands and appreciates the strength of feeling on this issue across the House. Only by working cross-party and taking on the tech companies head on will we get them to get in line and get this sorted.

Margot James: I agree; a cross-party approach is much more powerful. We want to spend our time not arguing across the Floor of the House, but on confronting the tech companies with the responsibility that they should bear, and on representing and championing citizens, who deserve better.

The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock—[*Interruption.*]. I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant)—I clearly need to know my Scottish constituencies better. I apologise to both hon. Members. I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution and for the outrage he expressed on behalf of his constituents.

The SNP spokesperson is the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). I share her shock that the majority of football authorities did not even deign to respond to the letters from the Petitions Committee demanding that they become part of the solution against the horrendous level of abuse that seems to emanate from the world of football. Sadly, racism in football has still not been dealt with, but at least they are engaged in tackling that. I will speak to the Minister for Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), to seek her support to get the football authorities to engage on the abuse of disabled people.

Hannah Bardell: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I do not think that the Petitions Committee wrote to any clubs or authorities in Scotland—I make no criticism; that is just an observation. I would be happy to help facilitate contact with them, and I suggest that a copy of the Committee's report should go to every football club in the United Kingdom, along with a letter calling them to a meeting where we have cross-party representation at which we can eyeball them and tell them just how strongly people in this House feel about their clubs and the action they need to take.

Margot James: That is an excellent suggestion. I am happy to put that to my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport, and if the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Warrington North, who chairs the Petitions Committee, would like to attend that meeting, we will set that up. Yes, we will definitely invite all football authorities to that meeting.

The hon. Member for Warrington North also talked about the effect on moderators. Thousands of people are now employed by tech companies to moderate content and make decisions on whether it crosses the threshold and should be taken down. We are looking more and more to systems of artificial intelligence to do as much of that job as possible, precisely for the reasons she set out. It is a horrendous job to do, and I imagine that over time it ends up affecting the moderators' mental health. On a positive note, 75% of the 4 million videos that YouTube has taken down in, I think, the past six months were identified and removed via artificial intelligence. That does offer us some hope for the future.

Liam Byrne: The Minister is being generous. The only danger with introducing such statistics, which all the social media companies are desperate to put into our hands, is that it creates the impression that somehow they are doing enough when they are not. We will never get to a solution to this problem by relying on voluntary action. That is why the law needs to change, and enforcement needs to change.

Margot James: I certainly agree with the right hon. Gentleman. I am sorry if I gave that impression; I wanted to offer up some hope that over time more and more solutions for removal will be technological so that moderators, who have a terrible job to do, do not have to spend their working lives wading through this horrendous content. To clarify, that is absolutely not at all to say that companies are doing enough. They are doing more, but it is by no means enough as yet.

Helen Jones: One thing that tech companies need to do, as the police, GCHQ and other authorities do, is provide regular counselling for the people who have to deal with such appalling content. At the tech companies, moderating is often done by poorly paid people in very poor countries, and no support is provided for them.

Margot James: The hon. Lady makes a good point; people would need that. I believe more and more counselling is being offered, but I am not aware of whether that offer is consistent across the industry or provided only by the better-performing companies.

I reassure the hon. Lady that the Government have engaged with disability organisations and will continue to do so. Last year I held a roundtable with organisations focused specifically on online abuse of people with disabilities, and next month I will chair a roundtable focusing on adults with learning disabilities. I really am very sorry if the Government have given the impression that we think these problems are confined to children and young people, because they most certainly are not, as the hon. Lady said eloquently in her speech. I completely agree. In fact, the organisations with whom I had the roundtable mostly represented adults, and the next one

will be mostly about young adults with learning disabilities. That is what I will do to follow up the debate and the petition.

I want to say a few words about the online harms White Paper. I reiterate my earlier point that self-regulation has failed—the shadow Minister is right about that. We all agree on that, and that is why the Government will establish a new statutory duty of care to make companies take more responsibility for the safety and security of their users and tackle the harm caused by the content and activity on their services. Compliance with the duty of care will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator. Companies will be held to account for tackling a comprehensive set of online harms, including behaviours that may or may not be illegal but none the less are highly damaging to individuals and threaten people's rights online. The Government are consulting on the most appropriate enforcement powers for a regulator.

[IAN AUSTIN *in the Chair*]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, who is a former Policing Minister, mentioned the structure of policing and whether there are capability as well as resource issues. I should have mentioned that the White Paper is in fact a joint Home Office and DCMS White Paper. We have therefore had input from Home Office Ministers, and I will raise his point with them. *[Interruption.]* I am somewhat distracted by a lot of noise—I do not know where it is coming from.

Ian Austin (in the Chair): They are cheering you on, Minister. Take it while you can.

Margot James: I see that we have had a change of Chair. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship as well, Mr Austin.

Coming back to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, we intend that the new system of regulation will take some of the burden off the police and place it on to the tech companies. Those companies should be accountable for taking care of their users by eliminating such content, hopefully before it comes online but certainly very swiftly after it is reported.

The law in Germany, which the shadow Minister referred to, requires content to be taken down within 24 hours of companies knowing about it; if it is later than that, swingeing fines can be applied. We want to create an environment in which companies deal with matters themselves and use less and less of our valuable policing time for the privilege.

As I mentioned earlier, we have committed to developing a media literacy strategy—one of the proposals made by Glitch—to ensure that we have a co-ordinated and strategic approach to online media literacy education. We have published a statutory code of practice for social media providers about dealing with harmful content, and we have consulted on the draft code with a variety of stakeholders, including people with disabilities. The code includes guidance on the importance of social media platforms having clear, accessible reporting processes and accessible information on their terms and conditions, highlighting the importance of consulting users when designing new software, new apps and new safety policies.

There has been some discussion about whether the law itself is adequate, particularly with regard to hate crime. I will say a few words about the Law Commission's review. In February last year the Prime Minister announced that the Law Commission would undertake a review of current legislation on offensive communications to ensure that laws are up to date with technology. The Law Commission completed the first part of its review and published a report at the end of last year. It engaged with a range of stakeholders, including victims of online abuse, the charities that support them, legal experts and the Government. The report concluded that abusive communications are theoretically criminalised to the same or even greater degree than equivalent offline behaviours—I did not necessarily accept that verdict myself—but practical and cultural barriers mean that not all harmful online conduct is pursued through criminal law enforcement to the same extent that it is in an offline context. I think the consensus in this room is that that is definitely the case.

The Government are now finalising the details of the second phase of the Law Commission's work. The Law Commission has been asked to complete a wide-ranging review of hate crime legislation in order to explore how to make hate crime legislation more effective, including whether it is effective in addressing crimes targeting someone because of their disability. I urge Members present and organisations that might be taking an interest in this debate to give their input to the review.

Liam Byrne: Before the Minister finishes, I am grateful for the opportunity to ask her whether she thinks that the Law Commission's work is going to finish in time to allow her to bring a Bill before the House in the next Session.

Margot James: I am afraid that I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. We are not sure when the next Session will commence, but I fear that the timing of the second phase of that work means that it will not be carried out in time to form the basis of much-needed changes to the law, which I hope the Law Commission will propose. We might have to wait until the following Session. Having said that, the Law Commission might have an opportunity to provide some interim results from its inquiries, and there is nothing to stop an hon. Member introducing a private Member's Bill, should the opportunity arise, to look closely at the subject and bring something forward for debate.

This review of hate crime is very necessary. One of today's contributions mentioned the fact that hate crime is aggravated by certain characteristics, including disability, but that might not go far enough. These matters and a review of hate crime are part of the remit of the second phase of the Law Commission's work. I will also be suggesting to the Law Commission that it looks at the issue of online gender-based hate crime. As the hon. Member for West Ham mentioned, a significant amount of online abuse is misogynistic—it devalues women, it degrades them sexually and it amounts to gender-based hatred. There is a powerful case for women to be afforded the same legal protection against misogynistic online abuse as that given to people with other protected characteristics over which they have no control.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their thoughtful contributions and the Petitions Committee for the huge amount of work it has done on this vital subject. I look

[Margot James]

forward to continued engagement from across the House as we develop the proposals set out in the online harms White Paper.

6.6 pm

Helen Jones: I thank all the Members who have spoken this afternoon for their useful contributions to the debate, and their suggestions for going further with the task. I know that the Minister takes the matter extremely seriously. However, some of the changes to the law that are required are of course not within her Department. I hope that she will convey to the Home Office the strength of feeling from the debate, particularly about the need to strengthen the legislation on disability hate crime.

There were useful suggestions about, for example, making sure that the people employed by technology companies are diverse and understand the issues, and about ways of looking at digital citizenship education. All those suggestions were welcome and I am sure that the Petitions Committee will do follow-up work and take them into account. However, we need changes in the law. The online harms White Paper is a useful step in the right direction, but other changes are also needed. I might make a comparison with a number of other issues that we have dealt with in the past: sometimes the law follows changes in society, but sometimes the law itself changes people's perceptions. The Race Relations Act 1965 did not get rid of racism but at least it stopped some of its overt manifestations. It used to be considered acceptable to drink several pints and get behind the wheel of a car, but it is not any longer, because the law changed. Sometimes we need changes in the law to lead people to change their attitudes. That is what we are asking for in the present case.

We also need, as some hon. Members said, to make sure that the police have the right technology and skills, and the right number of people to make sure that the law is enforced. Digital companies must bear their responsibility: that is exactly right, as the Minister said.

However, when a crime is committed the police need the resources to pursue the crime and bring people to justice for it.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and to the Minister for what she has said today. I want to mention, again, that the police service in my constituency has had major difficulties in trying to get offensive drill music taken down. It was being used by gang members to call each other out; it was inciting violence on the street. The police tell me that despite the fact that they asked YouTube to take the videos down it did not happen, and that they did not have enforcement powers. We need the powers to do what is right. We need to give our police not only the resources they need but the powers they need to keep children safe.

Helen Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Today's debate is perhaps an example of how debates should be conducted in the House—civilly, and with useful contributions—and it has been clear that there is support across the House for change. Most of all, we have to be clear that we are changing attitudes and that things that have previously been considered acceptable, at least by some sections of society, are not acceptable. We have to make sure that the concerns of disabled people and others are finally heard and attended to. They have not been heard in the past and I hope that we have changed that today, and that we shall go on to ensure that the law is changed so they no longer feel excluded.

Ian Austin (in the Chair): Before we proceed, we should all thank the sign language interpreters, who have been ensuring that everyone is fully able to follow what has been said in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 190627 relating to online abuse.

6.10 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statement

Monday 29 April 2019

JUSTICE

Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Ministry of Justice is today publishing the response to the consultation paper

Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017: Implementing the Act. The response collates views from a variety of key stakeholders on the Department's proposals for bringing the Act into force. The response will be available on www.gov.uk.

I have placed a copy of the response in the Libraries of both Houses.

It remains the Government's intention to bring the Act into force in July 2019.

[HCWS1526]

Petition

Monday 29 April 2019

OBSERVATIONS

JUSTICE

The Petition of Giovanni Di Stefano

The petition of Giovanni Di Stefano,

Declares that the petitioner is currently held in custody at HMP Highpoint, Stradishall, Suffolk, CB8 9YG and is a national of the Republic of Italy and born on the 1 day of July 1955 in Petrella Tifernina, Campobaso, 86024 Italy. The petitioner is serving a sentence imposed by Southwark Crown Court of 14 years by HHJ McCreath on 27 March 2013. The petitioner is a foreign national prisoner subject to deportation the order of which was served on 27 June 2013. Parliament enacted the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 specifically with S. 34(5) amending the Criminal Justice Act 2003 by inserting S.259A. The purpose Parliament enacted this Act and section was to permit foreign national prisoners and others who had served half the requisite custodial period of any sentence to be removed from this jurisdiction provided that those could satisfy the Secretary of State for Justice that they had “settled intentions” of not returning by residing in the country to which they are removed. Section 259A of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 would come into force on such a day as the Secretary of State may by Order appoint. It is now 11 years since the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 has been enacted. The Secretary of State for Justice has yet to commence this section of sovereign statute that Parliament enacted.

The petitioner thus humbly requests that the House of Commons does press the Secretary of State for Justice to forthwith commence this section which would immediately ease the burden on a much overcrowded prison estate allowing the Home Office to remove all those immediately who gave their settled intention to reside outside this jurisdiction and those who could satisfy the Statute. There is no valid reason why after 11 years the Secretary of State has not commenced this section.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Roger Gale, *Official Report*, 13 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 7P.]

[P002439]

Observations from the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart):

The Government have the following observations to make:

Section 259A was inserted to the Criminal Justice Act 2003 by Section 34(2) of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008. It was a scheme designed as an extension to the Early Removal Scheme (ERS) for Foreign National Prisoners and would have allowed British nationals, EEA nationals and Irish nationals, who were not subject to a deportation or removal from the UK, and who demonstrated a settled intention to reside permanently outside the UK to be removed from prison up to nine months before they would otherwise be automatically released. It was known as the Early Removal Scheme for Resettlement (ERSR).

The Section 259A provisions were never commenced and were removed from the statute books by Section 118(4)(b) of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 which repealed Section 34(2) of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008.

As such, there are no longer any provisions relating to the ERSR for the Secretary of State for Justice to commence.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 29 April 2019

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|--|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| EDUCATION | 1 | EDUCATION—continued | |
| Apprenticeships: Careers Guidance | 15 | Leaving the EU: Tertiary Education | 8 |
| Conditions Improvement Fund..... | 17 | School Curriculum..... | 16 |
| Creative Projects: Early Years Experience | 4 | School Exclusions: Timpson Review | 1 |
| Education Funding: England..... | 12 | School Funding: North-East..... | 15 |
| Immigration Legislation: Tertiary Education..... | 6 | School Places: Essex..... | 11 |
| Language Teaching | 9 | Topical Questions | 18 |

WRITTEN STATEMENT

Monday 29 April 2019

| | <i>Col. No.</i> | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|
| JUSTICE | 1WS | |
| Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act..... | 1WS | |

PETITION

Monday 29 April 2019

| | <i>Col. No.</i> |
|---|-----------------|
| JUSTICE | 1P |
| The Petition of Giovanni Di Stefano | 1P |

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Monday 6 May 2019**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Monday 29 April 2019

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Education

Tuition Fees: EU Students [Col. 25]
Answer to urgent question—(Chris Skidmore)

Rape Victims: Disclosure of Evidence [Col. 40]
Answer to urgent question—(Mr Hurd)

HS2: Buckinghamshire [Col. 51]
Answer to urgent question—(Ms Ghani)

Northern Ireland: Political Process [Col. 61]
Statement—(Karen Bradley)

European Union (Citizens' Rights) [Col. 72]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Chemical Weapons) [Col. 73]
Motion—(Sir Alan Duncan)—agreed to

Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Zimbabwe) [Col. 86]
Motion—(Sir Alan Duncan)—agreed to

Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Belarus) [Col. 86]
Motion—(Sir Alan Duncan)—agreed to

Exiting the European Union (Sanctions) (Syria) [Col. 86]
Motion—(Sir Alan Duncan)—agreed to

Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament [Col. 86]
Motion—(Paul Maynard)—agreed to

Private Tower Blocks: Removal of Cladding [Col. 87]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Online Abuse [Col. 1WH]
e-Petition debate

Written Statement [Col. 1WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]
Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
