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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 7 May 2019

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Sussex our warmest congratulations on the birth of their son.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Patient Registration: GP Surgeries

1. **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that patients with no (a) fixed address and (b) proof of identity can register at GP surgeries. [910713]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): We are very clear that GP surgeries cannot refuse to register somebody who is of no fixed abode or has no proof of identification. Where a practice does not properly provide correct access to vulnerable groups, the commissioner will intervene to ensure that it corrects that. Ultimately, the commissioner can issue a remedial notice and can terminate a contract or practice that still does not abide by its obligations.

Kate Green: Has the Minister seen the report by a mystery shopper from Friends, Families and Travellers who attempted to register with 50 GP practices without ID or proof of address? Twenty-four refused to register her or would not register her; all but two of those were rated outstanding by the Care Quality Commission. The Minister says GPs must properly follow the guidance, but does she agree that the CQC needs to ensure that it uses the inspection regime to enforce that guidance?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I totally agree. I have seen the report, which I welcome; I will certainly take it up with the CQC. It is very important that we use all tools to ensure that everyone has access to the healthcare they deserve, because it is all too easy for some groups to remain discriminated against. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for shining a light on this important issue.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): We have one of the very few free at point of need health services in the world. Does the Minister agree, however, that checks are important in cracking down on health tourism? Does she have the latest assessment of the cost of health tourism to our NHS?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—health tourism is a major cost to the taxpayer, so it is important that we establish that people are entitled to care. However, it is important to ensure that people without proof of ID and of residence are still entitled to healthcare. Where someone is not entitled to it, we will, of course, pursue them for payment.

Radiotherapy Services

2. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): What funding his Department plans to allocate to radiotherapy services in the next five years. [910714]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Our radiotherapy modernisation programme has so far delivered 80 upgrades or replacements, with more to come.

Grahame Morris: One in four people currently receive radiotherapy—a number that will increase if the Government achieve their early diagnosis targets. Ministers dispute that 20,000 people in England annually miss out on appropriate access to life-saving radiotherapy. What is the Secretary of State's estimate? Will he commit to meeting representatives of the Radiotherapy4Life campaign to discuss how we can improve radiotherapy provision in England?

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely happy to meet the group. According to the latest figures, about four in 10 of all cancer patients are treated with radiotherapy; it is a critical treatment to tackle cancer. As I say, there has been an investment programme to replace and upgrade radiotherapy equipment, with 80 upgrades or replacements over the past three years, but there is clearly more to do to make sure that people with cancer get the best possible treatment.

24. [910737] **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): May I welcome the NHS long-term plan commitment to complete the £130 million upgrade of radiotherapy machines throughout England? I ask my right hon. Friend to confirm that more effective radiotherapy will mean patients experiencing fewer side effects and having shorter treatment.

Matt Hancock: Yes, that is exactly right. That is why we have put in place the new LINACs—linear accelerators, the equipment that is being rolled out across the country in a £130 million programme. We are always looking at what more we can do to help people to beat cancer.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the Secretary of State agree to look personally at the case for a new satellite radiotherapy unit at Westmorland General Hospital, tied to the Rosemere unit in Preston? I had the privilege last week of driving my constituent Kate Baron to her treatment at Royal Preston Hospital. Wonderful treatment though it is, it is a three-hour round trip that she has had to take on 15 separate occasions—I went with her only the once. Hundreds of people in the south Lakes have to make debilitating, lengthy round trips to get treatment day after day, which is damaging to their long-term health and to their ability to access radiotherapy at all.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He did not raise the individual case with me in advance, but I can see the point he is making. The public health Minister, who is responsible for cancer policy, will be very happy to meet him.

NHS Workforce Vacancies

3. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of workforce vacancies throughout the NHS. [910715]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The NHS employs more staff than at any time in its 70-year history. Posts may be vacant for a variety of reasons, including maternity and career breaks. The latest data shows that as of December 2018 about 80% of nursing vacancies and 85% of medical vacancies are filled by a combination of bank and agency staff.

Lilian Greenwood: Recent data from NHS Digital shows that there are 720 fewer GPs in the east midlands than just two years ago. According to NHS England, each month thousands of people wait more than four weeks for a face-to-face GP appointment in Nottingham. In January, 3,206 people had to wait more than 28 days between making the appointment and seeing their doctor. Ultimately, that is leaving the GPs we do have overwhelmed and overworked. I know myself that it is creating huge pressures on the emergency department at Queen's Medical Centre. What is the Minister going to do to change that system?

Stephen Hammond: The NHS long-term plan will set out vital strategic frameworks to ensure that the needs for the next 10 years are met. The hon. Lady will know that we are training an extra 5,000 GPs to work in primary care and general practice. If she writes to me about the specifics of the numbers she mentioned in respect of Nottingham, I will be happy to respond.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Those of us who are campaigning to reopen a full obstetric unit at Horton General Hospital know how important the workforce are to safety in our NHS. At an excellent meeting today, Baroness Harding set out some of the things we can do to increase our workforce, one of which was much better leadership and career planning for the staff we are already retaining in the NHS so that they want to stay longer. What is the Department doing about that?

Stephen Hammond: As my hon. Friend has heard, the Secretary of State commissioned Baroness Harding to bring forward the interim workforce plan. One of the workstreams was looking at retention and the staff we currently have. More than 52,000 nurses are in undergraduate training, and it is essential that they stay in the NHS after training. What Baroness Harding outlined today will ensure that that happens.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm today's *Daily Mail* report that the NHS plans to recruit thousands of overseas nurses over the next five years? How much of that shortage has been caused by the exodus of EU nationals from the NHS, and how much of it by the Government's disastrous decision to abolish nursing bursaries?

Stephen Hammond: I will not comment on the specifics of a leak from an outdated version of the plan. The NHS has always recruited nurses internationally and there are no plans to change that. The workforce plan will set out how more nurses, doctors and nursing associates will be recruited and retained inside the NHS.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Many surgeries in my constituency augment the work of GPs with nurse practitioners. Will the Minister join me in praising the work of nurse practitioners and say what more the Government could do to grow their number so that they can continue their excellent work in surgeries around the country?

Stephen Hammond: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Nurse practitioners do an extraordinarily valuable job across the country. The Government are committed to training more nurses and more nursing practitioners. As I said in an earlier answer, that will be set out in the workforce plan.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Change UK): The workforce shortfall is not evenly distributed across the NHS either geographically or by specialty. The Minister will know that there are particularly serious nursing shortfalls in learning disability and community services. He will also know of the implications of shortfalls—for example, for the ambition to deliver 75% of cancer diagnoses at stages 1 and 2. Will he look again at the evidence on mature students and the impact of losing bursaries on that section of the workforce? Will he meet me to discuss that?

Stephen Hammond: The Chair of the Select Committee is right: the vacancies are not evenly spread and are of particular concern in learning difficulties and a number of other areas. Of course we want to ensure that mature students come back to and stay within the health service. That is why a number of incentives are being put in place to encourage, recruit and retain mature students. I would, of course, be happy to meet her to discuss this matter in more depth.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I appreciate the Minister's comments about the need for retention and morale-boosting in the NHS. Does he agree that constantly going around fabricating threats of closures when no such threats exist, or talking down the NHS—as some politicians do—does not exactly help recruitment and retention either?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is completely right. One would have hoped that all Members on both sides of the House celebrate the fact that the number of nurses and the number of doctors in the NHS are now higher than they have ever been in its 70-year history, and that the Government are backing that up with a commitment to invest £33.9 billion.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Cuts in lifetime and annual pension tax allowances are causing senior doctors to retire earlier and younger consultants to avoid working extra hours, as they can end up paying more in tax than they earn from the extra hours of work. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with

the Chancellor about the fact that these recent changes are driving doctors from the profession and increasing workforce shortages?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady raises a very important matter. The Government recognise the concerns that have been expressed by NHS doctors, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is engaging in numerous conversations with the Chancellor. I am reluctant to give a running commentary on the nature of those internal discussions, but I can say that we hope to resolve the matter soon.

NHS Mental Health Services (University/College Students)

4. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the provision of NHS mental health services for university and college students. [910716]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care met the Secretary of State for Education in February to discuss concerns about mental health and the prevalence of self-harm among young people. "The NHS Long Term Plan" states that we will

"extend current service models to create a comprehensive offer for 0-25 year olds",

and I expect to have regular dialogue with our counterparts in the Department for Education to make that a reality.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The all-party parliamentary university group has heard consistent evidence about the rising number of students presenting with mental health problems. We have been told that it has increased sixfold in the last 10 years, from 9,675 to 57,000. That poses huge challenges to what used to be counselling services but are now becoming a mainstream part of health provision, funded by universities. What are the Government going to do about it?

Jackie Doyle-Price: Young people often fall out of care when they leave their home addresses to go to university. To deal with that transition, we extended the service to nought to 25-year-olds through the forward plan rather than cutting it off at adulthood. That will ensure that we can do more to achieve continuity of care.

I pay tribute to the efforts that universities have made. They have seized on the challenge posed by the increasing prevalence of mental health problems, and I will continue my dialogue with them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The students union at Anglia Ruskin University—which is based in Chelmsford as well as in that other "C" place, Cambridge—carried out a big study on student mental health. One of its requests was for students to be able to register with two GPs, one at home and one at university, so that they would not be stuck without a GP in the holidays or in term time. Can we look at that again?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will definitely look at it. As I have said, the transition poses real challenges, because of a process failure rather than any lack of willingness or commitment on anyone's part. We must ensure that people retain access to services as they move around.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The all-party parliamentary group on psychology, which I chair, heard just last week that young people who have done extremely well with child and adolescent mental health services are being put on waiting lists when they move away from home to colleges and universities, and are having to start again from the beginning. They are falling through the gaps. Will the Minister ensure that that does not happen any more, that there is no longer a postcode lottery, and that people who have done extremely well in getting into university receive all the support they need?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I see that there is a meeting of minds. Not only do I agree with what the hon. Lady has said, but I have met the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) to discuss exactly that issue. There is clearly a systemic weakness in respect of those who move between home and university, and we will continue our dialogue to ensure that it is fixed.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister will be aware of the close and often tragic link between mental illness and suicide, which is now the biggest killer of young people and is at record levels. What specific measures do the Government have to address that issue?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that we expect all local communities to have suicide prevention plans, part of which will be that they engage in areas of greatest risk, whether it be regarding place or their populations. Suicide is the biggest killer of young people and I expect local authorities to engage with education providers to make sure that sufficient measures are in place. We are in the process of challenging the plans to make sure they are fit for purpose.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Universities UK has warned that it simply cannot keep expanding to fill the gaps left by inadequate funding for NHS services, after university spending on mental health services rose by almost half in five years. Too often other sectors such as education are left to fill the funding gap this Government have left in mental health, so can the Minister tell me today when her Government will match our pledge to ring-fence funding for mental health?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I have always viewed the ring fence as a ceiling rather than a protection. We have the mental health investment standard and NHS England is challenging clinical commissioning groups that are not spending what we would expect.

This is a systemic weakness. We have treated children up to 18 and then considered them as adults, but the reality is that people do not suddenly achieve majority overnight. We intend through the forward plan to have the children and young people service from nought to 25. That should enable transition and stop people falling off the cliff edge at 18.

Prescription Drugs

5. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the availability of prescription drugs. [910717]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): Over 2 million prescription items are successfully dispensed in England every day, and we have well-established procedures to deal with medicine supply issues should they occur. We work closely with all those involved in the supply chain to help ensure any risks to patients are minimised when supply issues arise.

Justin Madders: I welcome the Minister to her place. She will know from written questions I have tabled that my constituents have real concerns about the availability of the epilepsy drug Sabril, which has been in short supply. She told me last month that supplies would be resolved by mid-April; she has now told me in a written answer that supplies will be resolved by mid-May. It seems there is a disconnect between what the Minister is saying and what is actually happening on the ground. When can she guarantee that this drug will be widely available again?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue again. We have expressed our great concern to the suppliers about this problem, and we are working alongside them to ensure that, although there is enough Sabril nationally, we get it in the right place at the right time. We will go back to them and express our concern again.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) on her appointment? I am sure the whole House wishes her well in her important work.

Related to the question of prescription drugs is that of vaccinations, where rates have been falling, partly driven by alarming and inaccurate material posted on social media, including Facebook. Will the Minister join me in calling on Facebook to remove material that deters people from vaccinating their children? If it refuses to do so, does she agree that legislation may be needed?

Seema Kennedy: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As he will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met Facebook last week.

On the issue of vaccination broadly, in 2017 we met the 95% rate for vaccination. Immunisation for everybody is absolutely crucial, but some children cannot be immunised because they are too young and others because they are immune-suppressed; so everybody who can be immunised should be immunised.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I also welcome the hon. Lady to her place.

Close to 100 commonly prescribed medications are in seriously short supply, including painkillers, antibiotics and antidepressants. Worries about Brexit outcomes have led to the stockpiling of medications, which has undoubtedly exacerbated the problem, but I know from my own experience in community pharmacy that there have been concerns about the supply chain for several years, long before Brexit was ever dreamed of. The Government have, however, consistently turned a blind eye to these problems, which place additional pressures on GPs and pharmacists and are most certainly detrimental

to patient care. Can the Minister assure me today that she understands the scale of the problem and outline the steps she is taking to resolve it?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the shadow Minister, my Lancashire neighbour, for her welcome. The Department takes this extremely seriously; we have a whole team working on it. There are about 12,500 prescribed medicines in this country, with only between 50 and 100 being looked at by the medicines supply team at any one time. There is no cause for complacency, though. In January this year, we took further steps to make it mandatory for pharmaceutical companies to report any supply issues to us as soon as possible.

Urgent Care: Kettering

6. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will make provision for (a) a new urgent care hub at Kettering General Hospital and (b) a health and social care pilot in Northamptonshire with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. [R] [910718]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The Government are committed to transforming the NHS estate. I discussed the urgent care hub with my hon. Friend and other colleagues in January, and, as he knows, I enjoyed my visit to Kettering General. He also knows that future levels of capital will be determined at the next spending review, after which our prioritisation process will be determined, to identify the strongest transformation schemes. We welcome initiatives from local leaders to strengthen and better integrate the local health and care landscape in Northamptonshire.

Mr Hollobone: When Kettering's present A&E was built 25 years ago, it was designed to cope with 45,000 patients a year. It is now coping with 91,000, and it is estimated that in 10 years' time, 120,000 will use the facility. The whole NHS in Northamptonshire recognises that an urgent care hub at Kettering General Hospital is urgently required. Will the Government get on and fund it?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is a diligent and consistent representative of his constituents on this matter. He will know that I have heard his request and that, as I have said to him before, the spending review will take place later in the year. Priorities will be decided at that stage.

Patient Experience: Digital Technology

7. George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the patient experience through the use of digital technology. [910719]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Providing patients with modern digital services that are safe, effective, convenient and personalised is central to our NHS long-term plan.

George Freeman: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and for the energy that he brings to this brief. Does he agree that digital health not only improves healthcare systems but also provides a platform for place-based and population-based prevention, better diagnosis, patient empowerment, novel mental health

therapies and accelerated access to the innovative treatments that I introduced as a Minister? This is now being pioneered in some parts of the country. Will he meet me and the Birmingham health partners to look at an interesting idea for digital place-based health impact bonds?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend to talk about interesting new policy innovations like that. It sounds right up my street. In fact, I met the Mayor of the West Midlands combined authority to discuss this subject only last week. There is a huge amount of enthusiasm and energy in this policy area, which will enable us to improve patients' lives across Birmingham and, indeed, the whole country.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, because he is a member, the Babylon Health GP at Hand digital service is based in Hammersmith and Fulham. By the end of this year, it will have run up a deficit of about £35 million for my clinical commissioning group. Given that the clinical commissioning group is cutting GP hours and closing an urgent care centre overnight because it is so short of funds, when are we going to be reimbursed for that £35 million?

Matt Hancock: I do not recognise the number that the hon. Gentleman talks about, but we are changing the way in which the GP contract works to ensure that this new technology can be most effectively harnessed to deliver patient need in a way that also works for the NHS. I am slightly surprised that he has not yet got up to say thank you for our announcement on primary care services in his part of London, which we are going to be expanding while stopping the closure of A&E. A little bit of gratitude for that would also go down well.

Autism

8. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve care for people with autism. [910720]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinanage): We are absolutely resolute in our commitment to improving care and support for autistic people, and we will launch a refreshed autism strategy, which will include children, by the end of the year. We have also launched a national call for evidence, to hear what we are doing that works and where we need to do more, and we have already received more than 2,000 responses.

Huw Merriman: I welcome the NHS long-term plan and the steps that will go towards helping autistic people in the healthcare system. Does the Minister agree that we will make a real difference only if we improve the recording of autism in local health and care records? Will she therefore commit to requiring the NHS to record autism diagnoses in each area with the aim of improving autistic people's health?

Caroline Dinanage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. Reasonable adjustments are critical for improving the experiences of health and care for autistic people. That is why the long-term plan commits to a digital flag in patient records, which will ensure that staff know whether a patient has a learning

disability or autism. At the same time, we are looking at how we record where a diagnosis of autism has been made.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): In 2017, more than 100 MPs wrote to the then Health Secretary demanding a national target of a three-month waiting time for autism diagnosis because waits were more than four years in some areas. Stockton clinical commissioning group and Stockton Council have reduced waits, but what do current figures show? Will the Government now set a target in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance?

Caroline Dinanage: I am pleased the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue, because he is absolutely right that we need to drive up performance nationally on diagnosis for autistic people. It is only with diagnosis that people can get the support and help they need. We are collecting data for the first time. It will be published later this year for the first time. It will mean that each area can be held to account and given the help and support it needs to drive up those figures.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline the steps that have been taken to push for a UK-wide, ring-fenced uplift to respite care funding for those who suffer from autism, bearing in mind that there is a two-year waiting list in some healthcare trusts for families to access overnight respite care?

Caroline Dinanage: That is a really good point. We all know that access to respite care can be incredibly valuable, both for autistic people and their carers and their loved ones. That is why we are supporting CCGs that want to invest in respite care, and we are looking more carefully at how we can direct funding to these important services.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Eight years after the Government pledged to move autistic people out of in-patient units following the Winterbourne View scandal, there are still 2,260 people in such units, many of whom are subject to restraint, over-medication, seclusion and even neglect. Rather than reviews and warm words, will the Secretary of State now act to change things by matching Labour's pledge of £350 million of extra funding to move autistic people and people with learning disabilities back into the community where they belong?

Caroline Dinanage: Of the original 2015 cohort that the hon. Lady mentioned, 6,325 people have been discharged and 476 beds have been decommissioned, but the thing is that people are still coming in. The only way we can achieve permanent, long-term cuts is if we invest in community health. That is why the long-term plan commits to an extra £4.5 billion a year for community health. Local providers are expected to use some of that to develop the right specialist services in the community to reduce avoidable admissions.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

9. **Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the efficiency of decision making by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. [910721]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Wherever possible, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence aims to publish recommendations on new drugs within a few months of licensing and now publishes draft guidance on cancer drugs even before licensing. Many thousands of patients have benefited from rapid access to effective new drugs as a result.

Lyn Brown: The Secretary of State will know that Maryam is now nine months old. We have been waiting nine long weeks for NICE to announce a decision that I am told it has already made. Spinal muscular atrophy babies have been waiting 16 months for the care they need, which is longer than many SMA babies live without treatment. There is another closed-door meeting tomorrow. If NICE finally decides to provide Spinraza on the NHS, how long will it be before Maryam and the other babies get their first dose?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady rightly raises an important case, and I have met her about it and followed it closely. As she says, there is work ongoing and happening this week to try to make progress. NICE is currently developing technical appraisal guidance on the use of the drug Spinraza, to which she refers. We are working to ensure that we can get it right.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on multiple sclerosis, may I urge my right hon. Friend to ask NICE to expedite its perfectly proper processes on the licensing of cannabis-based drugs, particularly for the treatment of multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's and motor neurone disease?

Matt Hancock: Yes. My hon. Friend raises another important area where progress is being made on the ability for people to get access to drugs that could help them. We now have a medicinal cannabis programme in place, as we discussed in this Chamber a couple of weeks ago, so that those with acute conditions and with clinical support for using medicinal cannabis can get it. We are also working as rapidly as we reasonably can to normalise the ability to use medicinal cannabis within the NHS.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Kuvan, Orkambi and Spinraza—these are just three life-changing drugs to which thousands of patients are being denied access on the NHS. Patients have waited far too long for the drugs they desperately need, and for some, as we have heard, it is a matter of life and death. Does the Secretary of State agree that the NICE appraisal process for rare diseases is just not fit for purpose?

Matt Hancock: I do agree it is important that NICE constantly tries to get those decisions made objectively, robustly and as fast as possible. There is cross-party support, and I hope continuing cross-party support, for these judgments being made independently so that they are taken not by Ministers but by clinicians. We can all agree that this has to be done as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Mental Health Funding

11. Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on patient outcomes of regional variations in mental health funding. [910724]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Funding allocations to clinical commissioning groups vary to meet the needs of local populations, including mental health needs. These allocations are determined by a formula managed for the NHS by the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation. For mental health, the formula takes into account patient-level data covering community, out-patient and in-patient mental health services, as well as improving access to psychological therapies activity and hospital episode statistics.

Gill Furniss: One in three early intervention in psychosis services in the north of England does not meet the standard that NHS England expects. What is NHS England doing to end this postcode lottery and ensure that my constituents can access the same high-quality mental health services as people in other areas of the country?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is right to highlight this. Good care depends not only on money but on performance, and we expect the Care Quality Commission to be very challenging in inspections so that we can guarantee consistency in the quality of services, rather than experiencing the postcode lottery she mentions. I am disappointed that the CQC rated Sheffield Health and Social Care NHS Foundation Trust as requiring improvement following the inspection in May and June last year, but we expect that challenge to continue so that there are obvious improvements.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The additional money for mental health in the NHS long-term plan is very welcome, but does the Minister share my concern that it is essential that that money reaches the frontline and results in improved services and improved access to services? What steps is she taking to ensure this money does result in improved services?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend will know that, in addition to the additional £2.3 billion, we are clear that this money will lead to more rapid treatment. NHS England will also be giving a really direct challenge to clinical commissioning groups and trusts to make sure improved services are delivered on the frontline.

Nursing Associates

12. Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the number of nursing associates in the NHS. [910725]

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Health Education England is leading a national nursing associate programme with a commitment for 7,500 nursing associate apprentices to enter training in 2019. It is also working with health and care providers to develop a talent

pipeline of future nursing associates, as well as sharing how providers are deploying currently qualified nursing associates.

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, and I thank the Secretary of State for his welcome announcement last month on “Shaping a Healthier Future” in London, which has gone down very well locally. How many more nurses does the Minister for Health think London will need over the spending review period? What specific measures is he taking to improve London’s offer to would-be nurses?

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct that the Secretary of State’s announcement has gone down extremely well. He will know that there are now more nurses in training than ever before—over 50,000—and he will know that London, in particular, will get its share of those nurses. He should be reassured that we are creating routes into nursing via nurse training, nursing recruitment and, indeed, nursing associates, and their recruitment into valuable roles across the health service will benefit his constituents.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister know that when I went to a restaurant the other night with my wife there was a hum and a buzz coming mainly from the young women there? I asked, “Who are all these young women?” The maître d’ said, “They are all young Spanish nurses who are going home. This is their last evening in Britain.” Nursing associates will not fill that gap; these are young people coming in at the classroom assistant level of qualification. We need more nurses now, and we want to stop this haemorrhaging of nurses who are going back to the rest of Europe.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman will know that nursing and nursing associate training places are being increased; that more funding is going in to increase nurse training places by 25% every year, from last September; and that we are announcing an expansion of nursing associates. He will see tomorrow, when new figures are announced, that more nurses are working in the NHS than this time last year.

Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma Awareness

13. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on recognising 17 May as diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma awareness day. [910726]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): The NHS long-term plan makes it clear that cancer survival is a Government priority, and we wholly support any activity to raise awareness of devastating cancers such as DIPG. The overwhelming message from two powerful debates last year, here and in the other place, spearheaded by the late Baroness Tessa Jowell, was that better outcomes for children and adults with brain tumours lie in better research. That is why we announced £40 million, over five years, to stimulate innovative brain tumour research, working alongside the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Research Mission.

Patricia Gibson: As the Minister will be aware, having DIPG awareness day on 17 May is very important in raising the awareness of this fatal illness, which is often overlooked and where the prognosis has not improved in the past 40 years, despite 40 children in the UK dying from it each year. How will the people suffering from DIPG benefit directly from the funding that she has outlined? Does she commit to keeping the House updated on measures to combat this serious illness?

Seema Kennedy: Let me begin by paying tribute to my constituent Paula Holmes, who made me aware of DIPG, and to all the work she has done in memory of her daughter Katy, one of the 40 children who died from it. We rely on researchers to submit high-quality research proposals in this difficult area, and the National Institute for Health Research has put out a highlight notice asking for research teams. We stand ready to translate any new discoveries as quickly as possible into new treatments and diagnostics for patients, and I am happy to keep the House updated.

Flour Fortification: Folic Acid

14. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What his policy is on the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. [910727]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): We have announced our intention to consult on the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. We are fully committed to this and we will be launching the consultation as soon as possible.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but the Government said in January that the consultation would happen soon. As it was originally announced in October, people are becoming frustrated. Can she say that this will happen before the summer? Can she confirm that it will be about how we go about mandatory fortification, rather than about whether we should do it?

Seema Kennedy: I share the hon. Gentleman’s frustration, and I know that Members have been waiting for this. I am reassured by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that this will happen. I am going to be making it happen before the summer, and I will return to the House to update it.

23. [910736] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): The Healthy Start scheme, which provides food vouchers and coupons for free vitamins, reaches only about a third of children living in poverty. It is also woefully out of date; it is worth only £3.10 and it has not been updated since 2009. What are the Government doing to improve both the scale and impact of this important scheme?

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), says that she is looking into it and that we will report back.

Dementia Support

15. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of support for people with dementia. [910728]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinéage): We are absolutely committed to making this the best country in the world in which to live with dementia by 2020. Already, more than two thirds of people with dementia receive a diagnosis; there are 2.85 million dementia friends and 346 areas in England are dementia friendly; and the £250 million dementia discovery fund is the largest venture fund in the world aimed at discovering and developing therapies for dementia.

Martin Vickers: I thank the Minister for her reply. I recently met representatives of the Alzheimer's Society, which is, as the Minister will know, pushing forward with a campaign for more support for those suffering from dementia. Can she assure me that, despite what she has just said, this will be one of the main focuses of her Department during the comprehensive spending review?

Caroline Dinéage: We are absolutely committed to ensuring that everybody, including those who live with dementia, has access to the care and support that they need. We have noted the very important contributions of the Alzheimer's Society and of a number of other reports. We are considering a number of different funding options and are keen to draw on the best practice of what works so that no one ends up spending their life savings on their care.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): My friend and constituent Malcolm Haigh, who is known locally as Mr History because of his forensic knowledge of the history of Batley and Spen, is now living with dementia. We know that social prescribing for dementia sufferers really does work, and I congratulate Kirklees Council on its innovative Community Plus scheme, which uses social prescribing for dementia. What auditing is going on that will look at the community groups that are offering these singing clubs and walking and cycling groups, and how we audit them in order to make the best of social prescribing so that we take the burden off the NHS?

Caroline Dinéage: Mr History sounds fabulous. There will be a new academy of social prescribing, which will look at some of the incredibly valuable work done by communities up and down the country and really be able to draw out some of that best-value analysis.

Mental Health Services

16. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase awareness of rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions in mental health services. [910729]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Steps to increase awareness of rare conditions in care settings and speciality services, including mental health services, are being taken through the implementation of the UK rare

disease strategy. The Department published an update to its implementation plan for achieving the commitments and strategy in England in February this year to coincide with Rare Disease Day.

David Duguid: I thank the Minister for her answer. Specific mental health problems are common symptoms of the genetic and often undiagnosed condition of 22q11.2 deletion syndrome and therefore many people with the condition need access to knowledgeable mental health services, but families often report being unable to get the support that they need. With Mental Health Awareness Week fast approaching, will the Minister meet me to discuss increasing awareness of 22q11.2 among NHS mental health practitioners and ensure that people with the syndrome can access the services that they need in all parts of the United Kingdom?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course I will be happy to meet him. He is right to identify the fact that people with long-term conditions are more likely to suffer from mental ill health. It is very important that we achieve good care co-ordination so that all those issues can be tackled in the round. We will continue to work to ensure that professionals are made aware of these conditions.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I have spent much of the past week supporting the parents of a child who has a very, very rare genetic condition and who now needs the support of child and adolescent mental health services. It has become very clear to me that CAMHS is set up only to deal with mainstream children who can go through perhaps its anxiety counselling courses and who can process information in a certain way. It does not seem at all geared up to help children who have very complex needs and perhaps learning disabilities. What can we do to make sure that those children who are more vulnerable are not left behind?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Lady is entirely right. I am particularly concerned about the impact on young people going through a period of mental ill health who have neurodiverse conditions and other conditions. It is very important that we tackle the entirety of the individual's need. Clearly, we need to do more to make sure that all children with whatever conditions can access help when they need it.

Mr Speaker: My ambition is to reach Question 17 so that the House, Mid Sussex, the nation, the European continent and the world can hear the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames).

Best Practice

17. Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): What progress he is making on the dissemination of best practice throughout the NHS. [910730]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): Mr Speaker, I share your ambition in reaching Question 17 to be able to say that the long-term plan for the NHS sets out ambitious goals to embed a culture of quality improvement of which my right hon. Friend would be proud.

Sir Nicholas Soames: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for getting this far down the list of questions. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has a serious ambition to try to drive this plan forward, but it is unacceptable that best practice is not better disseminated throughout the NHS. It is completely unacceptable that there are such wide divergences in standards between hospitals, and it requires the everyday attention of the Secretary of State himself to drive this change through.

Matt Hancock: I agree entirely and enthusiastically with my right hon. Friend. The need to improve services in the NHS just to bring them up to the best that is in the NHS is vital and urgent. We can lift the quality of care that all our constituents get simply by learning from the best. We have schemes such as the “getting it right first time” programme, which is brilliant at teaching hospitals how to do things the way the best hospitals do them, and we want to see more.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): A recent report in the *British Journal of Surgery* demonstrates that the introduction of the Scottish patient safety programme resulted in a 36% drop in post-surgical deaths. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating all the surgeons, anaesthetists, theatre teams and ward staff who achieved this, and would he like to visit Scotland and see the programme in action?

Matt Hancock: I always love visiting Scotland and would love to come and see this programme in action; I have heard and read about it. In improving quality across the NHS, we need to improve the ability of the NHS to look everywhere—outside the NHS in England, as well as at other hospitals—to find and emulate best practice.

Mr Speaker: This is a general question about best practice in the NHS, into which the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) could legitimately shoehorn his concerns about acupuncture, chiropractic therapies, osteopathy and other non-drug based, non-addictive options for pain management, about which I think he is keen to expatiate.

19. [910732] **David Tredinnick** (Bosworth) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am clearly in your good books and I am most grateful. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explain why so little use is made of these three therapies in the health service, and why NICE has not made any attempt to look at hospitals in China, 50,000 of which use acupuncture for lower back pain?

Matt Hancock: Mr Speaker, I am glad that you have used your considerable flexibilities to bring this question in, because I wanted to say that NICE is in the process of developing a guideline on the management of chronic pain, which will look at the biological, physiological and social factors, including some treatments mentioned by my hon. Friend. There is progress in this space, and I am glad that we have been able to raise this matter in the House today.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As well as looking at best practice in the NHS, it is vital that we look at best practice in social care. Given that 70,000 people with dementia were admitted to hospital unnecessarily

with falls, dehydration and infections just last year, how is the Secretary of State going to put a laser-beam focus on standards in social care?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. I am glad that this discussion of improving quality across the NHS and social care has united the House in its enthusiasm to see best practice and ensure that people learn from it. We have seen an awful lot of learning in social care, as most social care is delivered by private sector providers, but there is more to do and there are different levers that we can pull. When social care providers lose their good or outstanding status, they also often lose their contracts, so there is an awful lot of pressure on them to learn from best practice around the country, and I would only emulate that.

Stem Cell Donation

18. **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote stem cell donation. [910731]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Since 2011, the Department has provided more than £26 million to NHS Blood and Transplant and to Anthony Nolan, to improve stem cell donation, and is now establishing a unified UK stem cell registry. I would also highlight the inspirational work of Team Margot, who are working to increase the number of people on that stem cell register by enrolling themselves in the transatlantic rowing race. I urge all hon. Members to support that campaign.

Antoinette Sandbach: I hope the Minister will join me in praising my constituent Peter, who has myeloma and set up the “10,000 donors” register. There are now 22,000 donors registered, but Peter has a rare ethnic mix of English, Irish, Chinese and Portuguese. What more can be done to encourage donors from minority communities?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have spent a lot of time encouraging donors from minority communities, but the real issue with regard to stem cell donation is that it is about genetic composition. We live in a wonderful society where we all have heritage going back in various, very complex ways, but that makes finding a suitable donor for stem cell donation extremely difficult. It is therefore important that we encourage people to take the test to establish their genetic heritage so that we can have more and more diverse people on the register.

Violence Against Women and Girls

20. **Sarah Newton** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What recent steps Public Health England has taken to help ensure that the violence against women and girls service commissioning guidelines are implemented throughout the NHS. [910733]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I thank my hon. Friend for her important work on the whole issue of violence against women and girls. Clinical commissioning

groups are the primary commissioners of NHS services, and, as such, play the lead role in ensuring that service commissioning guidelines on violence against women and girls are implemented through the NHS, as informed by evidence available and current guidance.

Sarah Newton: Public Health England is planning to update the public health outcomes framework this summer, but there are no planned outcome measures for victims of domestic abuse or sexual violence. Will my hon. Friend liaise with the Home Office and the clinical commissioning groups to consider measures so that we can all be confident that victims are getting timely access to appropriate services?

Jackie Doyle-Price: My hon. Friend is knocking on an open door, because this issue is very close to my heart. The public outcomes framework does include a measure of reported domestic abuse incidents and crimes that is intended to give an indication of the scale of the issue in each area, and we expect CCGs to commission services as a response to exactly those issues. I have written to CCGs to remind them to commission appropriate sexual violence services, as well as those already commissioned by NHS England so that we have proper support for people who have been victims of these terrible offences.

Topical Questions

T1. [910738] **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): It is the goal of the Department to support everyone to live longer, healthier lives. I will be working right across the health and social care sector to deliver the goal of five years of extra healthy life for people in the UK. In doing that, I am delighted that we will now have on the ministerial team the enthusiasm and assistance of the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy).

Mr Robertson: In achieving those goals, the Secretary of State will be concerned that while many patients can obtain GP appointments for emergency cases on the same day, quite a lot of people have to wait three or four weeks for non-emergency appointments. Can the Government do anything to improve that situation?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I entirely understand my hon. Friend's concerns. We are acting to make sure that there is better access. We have a review of access to primary care. But, more than that, the biggest increase of the £39.9 billion of extra taxpayers' money that we are putting into the NHS is in GP access, primary care and community care to make sure that we get ahead of the curve and help people to stay healthy rather than just treat them in hospital.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): Can the Secretary of State explain why 200,000 nurses have left the NHS since 2010 and why today we are short of 40,000 nurses?

Matt Hancock: The good news is that we have record numbers of nurses in the NHS. We have more staff in the NHS than at any time in its history. While of course in any very large organisation like the NHS there is always turnover, what matters is having the people we need. We are putting more money in, we are going to need more people, and we are developing a plan to make that happen.

Jonathan Ashworth: We have about 90 nurses a day leaving the NHS, so rather than posing for the newspapers by the stables like a character from a Jilly Cooper novel, why does the Secretary of State not show some actual leadership and reverse the cuts to development, reverse the cuts to training places and reverse the abolition of the training bursary so that we can start to recruit the nurses and midwives our NHS needs today?

Matt Hancock: What I will not reverse is the increase in the number of people who are helping to improve lives and save lives in our NHS. It is only because of the extra money that we in this Conservative Government have put into the NHS that we can be confident that we are securing its future to deliver better care for every single person whom we represent in this House.

T5. [910742] **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): Patient-GP ratios across the Witham constituency are under pressure and the highest in the country. Will my right hon. Friend use the forthcoming comprehensive spending review to secure more investment in not only GPs but Witham health services?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend is right to raise that. That money is already committed. Of the extra £33.9 billion that is going into the NHS, the biggest increase is going into community and primary care, because I understand how important it is for people to get decent access to their GP services in Witham and across England.

T2. [910739] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The council chair of the British Medical Association recently said:

"The only thing that is certain, is how disastrous leaving the EU will be for the NHS... no type of Brexit can ever offer the same benefits we currently have."

Does the Secretary of State agree with that sentiment, or can he tell the House how he thinks Brexit will improve the NHS?

Matt Hancock: No, the NHS is going to be there for us no matter what the outcome of Brexit is. The British people voted for Brexit, and we are going to deliver Brexit, and then we are going to get on to doing all the other things. Even over the last few months, we have been able to put extra money into the NHS to ensure that its future is guaranteed.

T6. [910743] **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I was pleased when the Department of Health and Social Care accepted that changes to our pensions legislation are driving early retirement and reduced hours among senior consultants. Can the Minister give an update on what discussions are being had with the Treasury to attempt to find a solution to that issue?

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): My hon. Friend will have heard me say in answer to the earlier question that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Chancellor are in discussions about that matter. It would be unfair of me to comment on the progress of those discussions, but we hope to resolve them soon.

T3. [910740] **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Maternity Action reports that migrant women requiring maternity care from NHS hospitals are being deterred from receiving treatment by charges and fear of immigration sanctions. Will the Secretary of State meet me and campaigners to discuss what we can do to address that worrying situation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): The issue that the hon. Lady raises is very concerning. I would be more than happy to meet her to look at that.

T9. [910746] **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Some 1,486 of my constituents have been diagnosed as suffering from dementia. The Alzheimer's Society is urging that, to provide the best support and care, carers should have tier 2 training. Is the Minister doing everything possible to achieve that?

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Yes. By 2020, we expect all relevant staff to have received appropriate dementia training.

T4. [910741] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In the north-east, over half of domiciliary care workers are on zero-hours contracts, 40% have no relevant qualification and, as the recent Low Pay Commission report shows, rates of non-payment of the minimum wage are rising, but enforcement is not. What will the Secretary of State do to improve the pay, conditions and training of careworkers who provide such an essential service?

Caroline Dinenage: This is all about getting more money into the system. That is why we have increased spending on adult social care by 9% over the last three years. We are focusing on attracting more people into adult social care, which is why we had the "Every Day is Different" recruitment campaign, to ensure that we get more brilliant-quality staff into adult social care roles.

T10. [910747] **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that nursing associates are an excellent new role on the frontline of the NHS, delivering hands-on care for patients? If so, what more can be done to get more of them across the country?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That role has been introduced to help build the capacity of the nursing workforce and support nurses and wider multidisciplinary teams. As he will have heard me say earlier, I am delighted that Health Education England is leading the national nursing associate training programme, with a commitment to train 7,500 nursing associates this year.

T8. [910745] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Tens of thousands of children are born every year with brain damage as a result of pre-natal exposure to alcohol, yet most clinical commissioning groups are not providing

support for those with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, despite Government guidance telling them to do so. Will the Government take the action needed and provide support for those suffering with this life-limiting and lifelong condition?

Jackie Doyle-Price: The hon. Gentleman is right. Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders are not sufficiently widely understood across the NHS. We must ensure that we give support to those who are affected and also raise awareness, not least to encourage people to understand the risks they are taking when they drink alcohol during pregnancy.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Over many years, High Wycombe has established a dramatic way to help tackle obesity. To that end, a week on Saturday, the mayor, a number of councillors and I will be weighed in public, to check whether we have put weight on at taxpayers' expense. If the Government wish to extend that programme to other Members of the House, I will be happy to ask to borrow the weighing tripod.

Mr Speaker: The only thing that is weighty about the hon. Gentleman, in my experience as a county colleague, is his brain.

Matt Hancock: I would be delighted to encourage that which my hon. Friend encourages. One thing that leads to people putting on weight is high levels of stress, so perhaps we could put some contentious issues behind us to reduce stress levels and allow all of us to lead healthier and happier lives.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) is experiencing no stress. I rather imagine that she is still celebrating that rocket of a goal last night by Vincent Kompany.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It was a magnificent and very important goal, Mr Speaker.

I would like to put it on record that my husband is an A&E consultant. The Secretary of State will know that one of the massive factors in gaps in rotas is that A&E doctors and other hospital doctors are facing notional tax rates of 90% or more from taking on extra shifts. It is not a very Tory policy, this. What is he doing about it?

Matt Hancock: This policy has come up a couple of times in questions today, and rightly so. I am having discussions with the Chancellor. It is a tax policy, and I do not think that my right hon. Friend would be incredibly enthusiastic about me announcing tax changes at the Dispatch Box. It is something that we are talking about and working on. It is the unintended consequence of tax changes that were designed for other parts of the economy.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The appropriate and safe disposal of drugs and medical equipment has recently been raised with me by my constituents in Corby. Will he keep in mind these concerns when reviewing policy in terms of both awareness of what to do and the ease with which it can be done?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. The NHS faced the loss of a contract last year, which was then safely put back into place. The point he makes about guidance is absolutely right, and if he wants to come and talk to me about it, I will be happy to discuss it.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is deeply concerning that in the past 10 years the number of prescriptions for opioid drugs has risen by 9 million. In this time, codeine-related deaths have more than doubled to over 150 a year. While I welcome moves to label opioid medicines, what further measures will the Secretary of State take to protect people from the dangers of opioid addiction?

Matt Hancock: As the hon. Lady may know, I am very concerned about this. We are working on what we can do to ensure that opioids are prescribed and used only when they are the most appropriate and right treatment. Opioids save people from significant pain and are used every day right across the NHS, but opioid addiction is a very serious problem. Some other countries have got this wrong, and we must get it right.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for coming to County Hospital in Stafford on Saturday. Does he agree that he saw there the importance of small accident and emergency departments sustaining the whole of the regional health economy by giving support to the larger ones?

Matt Hancock: Yes. It was brilliant to go to County Hospital in Stafford and see the hard work and team work and to be able to thank NHS staff both in Stafford and across the country working over the long weekend. My hon. Friend is a brilliant and diligent voice of Stafford. I have already stopped A&E closures in west London. I do not think that we should be seeing the closure of small A&E units, and I will work with him on the issue.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): As the Minister is aware, I have become concerned about the rising number of suicides in my constituency. When I talk to professionals in the area, they tell me that it is not just funding that is causing some of the

problems but the lack of staff. What more can the Minister do to ensure that we have the mental health staff that we desperately need?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that. She is right to do so. We are aware of some of the specific issues in her constituency, and I look forward to visiting and taking up some of the discussions directly.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The Secretary of State has been kind enough to visit Worcestershire Royal Hospital, which serves people in my constituency. He saw for himself how small the emergency department is there. With £20 billion going into the NHS, does he agree that there is a good opportunity to look again at returning services to Redditch—in particular, the maternity and A&E departments, which have been removed?

Matt Hancock: It was brilliant to visit Worcester hospital—another medium-sized hospital, but with a small A&E department that was working incredibly hard given the facilities. I pay tribute to all the work of staff there and very much take on board the points that my hon. Friend has made.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have a lot to get through. I shall take one more question, and then we must move on.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Today I met representatives of the Teenage Cancer Trust. As we await the publication of the workforce implementation plan following the publication of the NHS long-term plan, what plans does the Minister have to ensure sustainable funding for the teenage and young adult cancer specialist workforce?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; I had the pleasure of meeting representatives of the Teenage Cancer Trust recently as well. Cancer is an absolute priority for the Government. Our aim is for 75% of all cancers to be detected at an early stage by 2028. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, the workforce plan will be reporting imminently.

Severe Disability Premium

3.40 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State if she will make a statement on support for people formerly receiving severe disability premium who have transferred to universal credit.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Universal credit is the biggest change in the welfare system since it was created. It is a modern, flexible, personalised benefit reflecting the rapidly changing world of work. When designing universal credit, a choice was made not to replicate every aspect of the disability provision in the legacy system.

However, I want to make it very clear that our intention was that no money from this area would be taken out of the system. Universal credit was therefore designed with all the money from the old disability premium recycled to target support on the most severely disabled. Disabled people are some of the biggest beneficiaries of universal credit, with around 1 million disabled households having on average around £100 a month more on universal credit than they would have had on the legacy benefits.

On Friday, the High Court handed down a judgment in relation to universal credit and the severe disability premium. The severe disability premium is an additional premium payable with mean-tested benefits such as employment and support allowance. Universal credit is more targeted, and support is focused on those who need it most. Transitional protection will be available for people who are moved on to universal credit from other benefits, provided their circumstances stay the same.

We are pleased that the court recognises that it is for Ministers to frame the appropriate transitional arrangements for moving claimants on to UC, and we will consider all our options. The Government are committed to delivering a welfare system that supports disabled people.

Margaret Greenwood: On 7 June, the Government pledged that severe disability premium claimants would no longer have to transfer to universal credit until managed migration started. Yet for months afterwards, the claimants were still required to do so—until the Government finally introduced a statutory instrument, which came into force on 16 January.

Severe disability premium does not exist in universal credit, so, in transferring, those claimants lost about £180 a month. Often, that was just because they moved home; their postcode changed, but their needs did not. Yet the Government planned to pay them only £80 a month in compensation—far less than they would have received if they were to transfer under managed migration. It is little wonder that the High Court said in its damning judgment on Friday that the Government's decision had no logical foundation! Payments to former SDP claimants are part of the regulations for the managed migration pilot. The Government have still not scheduled these for debate, so no payments at all have been made; the judgment throws the Government's plans for the pilot into question, too.

Will the Government ensure that payments to former SDP claimants who have transferred to universal credit fully reflect the loss they have suffered? How many SDP claimants in total transferred to universal credit before 16 January? What assessment have the Government made of the hardship that former SDP claimants who have transferred to universal credit are suffering, and of the impact on children who have had to take on additional care responsibilities as a result of their families' loss of income? Will the Government publish a clear timeframe to identify and compensate disabled people for the losses that they have incurred? Will the Government separate regulations for the payments to former SDP claimants from those for the pilot for managed migration, so that Members of this House can vote on each separately?

By definition, these people are already having to cope with some of the most severe medical conditions and with disabilities. They should not have to fight through the courts for the support to which they should be entitled. They deserve better.

Justin Tomlinson: To reiterate, we have not taken any money out of the system. We are, rightly, targeting support at those who need it the most. For example, under legacy benefits, those on employment and support allowance would have expected to get £160.05 a month, but under universal credit it is significantly higher—in fact, more than double, at £336.20 a month. That is why over 1 million households with disabled people will on average be over £100 a month better off.

That goes hand in hand with our attempts to simplify the system. We are taking seven disability premiums down to two. The legacy system was difficult to deliver, prone to error and often confusing. Under the legacy system, over £2.4 billion of benefits went unclaimed every year. Some 700,000 of the most vulnerable people were, on average, missing out on £280 a month.

In addition to this support, many claimants will be entitled to support with personal independence payment, disability living allowance, attendance allowance or adult social care. Those going through the managed migration will get full transitional protection. We went further with good intentions by introducing the gateway on 16 January, including for those with changed circumstances. We will be considering all options in the light of the judgment and we will update the House in due course.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I welcomed the introduction of the gateway back in January. Will my hon. Friend confirm that this means that existing recipients of severe disability payments will be moved on to universal credit with transitional protections, so that they are fully protected as they move across?

Justin Tomlinson: I pay tribute to the former Minister, who did a huge amount of work in this area to ensure suitable transitional protection for some of the most vulnerable people in the system. It is absolutely the case that those who are part of the managed migration will get full transitional protection.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): We welcome the High Court decision and commend the individuals who brought their case for their perseverance. It is absolutely extraordinary that the Department for Work

[Alison Thewliss]

and Pensions thought it could get away with short-changing claimants who had already been made worse off by being moved on to universal credit. Because of the entirely arbitrary cut-off point where the DWP decided to stop naturally migrating SDP claimants, many thousands will miss out on £1,000 a month. That is completely unacceptable.

The ruling acknowledges what the SNP has been arguing since December: the Tories in Westminster are short-changing claimants who are owed back payments as a result of having their severe disability payments stopped. It is not only appalling that the DWP is short-changing claimants; it is appalling that people will now have to wait for those back payments until managed migration regulations are put through. Even then, it might take months to administrate them. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) has twice written to the Secretary of State asking for her to immediately initiate back payments, so that people do not have to wait.

Will the Minister tell the House why the payment of that money has been pegged to the managed migration regulations? Now that the ruling has allowed him to take stock, will he sort out this issue once and for all, and immediately put together regulations that legislate for the full back payments as a matter of urgency? There are now not one, not two but three ongoing cases where the DWP needed to investigate and initiate back payments of disability benefits on an enormous scale owing to error or to their policies being deemed unlawful. Will he ensure that no cuts to other areas of Government spending are being made to cover the cost of clearing up his Department's mess? Does he really believe that, after all this, disabled people who require support can have any confidence whatever that the DWP has their best interests at heart?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Member for the points she raises. To be absolutely clear, those who are part of the managed migration will get the full transitional support. The whole point of the gateway was to provide additional support for those who had changed circumstances that would not have been entitled to the full transitional protection. I absolutely understand the point about the urgency of bringing forward the regulations, but we want to ensure they are done in the correct manner so we do not replicate the errors of the difficult and complex legacy benefit, which we see in our surgeries as individual constituency MPs, whereby some of the most vulnerable people in society are missing out on the benefits to which we all agree they are entitled.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Of course people with disabilities must be properly served by our benefits system; I know the Minister well, so I know that he will be working extraordinarily hard to ensure that that happens in his Department. Is it not a fact that universal credit is targeted far more effectively at ensuring that help is given to those who most need it?

Justin Tomlinson: I know that my hon. Friend works extremely hard in this area; I have made several visits to his constituency, where I have seen him championing local organisations that make a difference to disabled

people in his community. Universal credit targets support at those who most need it, which is why, on average, more than a million disabled households will be £100 a month better off.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The severe disability premium does what it says on the tin: it goes to those with the most severe disabilities. Why, then, is the Minister claiming that people who most need support are gaining, when more than 10,000 people entitled to the severe disability premium are now waiting for back payments—like my constituent who is owed nearly £1,000 by the DWP? People are building up rent arrears and are in danger of eviction. Why are the Government not treating them properly by bringing forward this legislation and paying them what they are due?

Justin Tomlinson: We are all keen to bring forward those regulations, but I remind the hon. Lady that where under the legacy benefit an ESA claimant would expect £167.05, the equivalent under universal credit will be more than twice that: £336.20 a month.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Hon. Members of all parties have had experience of the problems that our constituents, particularly our disabled constituents, face with the transfer to universal credit. However, we must not lose sight of the successes. Yesterday, the *Grimsby Telegraph* carried a report in which Mr Mark Coad said that, following the death of his partner,

"I signed up for Universal Credit, and it has been one of the best things that I have ever done, because it not only got me back into work, but provided me with some support mentally, as it forced me to get out of the house and stop wallowing in my grief."

Does the Minister agree that we must focus on the successes and ensure that all cases have an equally successful result?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend raises an important broad point: universal credit offers personalised, tailored, bespoke support, for the first time. If hon. Members visit their local jobcentre and talk to staff, particularly to experienced staff, they will hear how for the first time they feel empowered to make a real difference to people's lives.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Does this latest botched attempt not underline that one reason why the Government are having trouble with universal credit is that it was primarily designed as a work-related benefit and that it continually misses out the people who need it most? Will the Government now re-table the managed migration regulations without the hard stop?

Justin Tomlinson: I do not recognise that point. As a Government, we are spending £5 billion more a year on supporting people with disabilities and long-term health conditions through the main disability benefits. We are rightly targeting support at those most in need in society. Through universal credit, that is coupled with a personalised, tailored and bespoke service.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The loss of the severe disability premium continues to cause hardship to people in my constituency and throughout the country. In some cases, it has forced people into rent

arrears and extreme poverty. What are the Minister and the Department doing specifically to support people in those situations?

Justin Tomlinson: Through the universal credit system, for the first time, they will have a named work coach who can help them to navigate not only any individual challenges that they face, but the additional support that they can get. Rightly, we are making sure that the most vulnerable people in society get both the financial support and the time from their named work coach to make sure that they are in their best position.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking to cascade the detail of this policy to advice services so that they can best help and support those who come to them seeking help?

Justin Tomlinson: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Not only do stakeholders and those with real, genuine frontline experience work closely with us and help to shape our policies, but we recognise that they can play a key part on the frontline. I therefore very much welcome the announcement that Citizens Advice will be present across the jobcentre network to provide additional support for claimants above and beyond what our frontline staff do.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): We know that approximately 20,000 people died before the Department was able to review their backdated ESA payments. That must not happen with the severe disability premium payments. Has the Department investigated whether it has happened to claimants who were owed such payments? If so, how many? In the event of death, who will receive the back payments?

Justin Tomlinson: The key priority is to make sure that we get money to the most vulnerable in society as quickly as possible. That is why our commitment remains that we will bring forward the regulations at the earliest opportunity.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): In March, I raised with the Minister the case of a constituent with a severe brain injury who applied for universal credit in August 2018 and immediately lost his severe disability premium. The Minister requested that I write to him. As yet, I have received no response. My constituent has now been without his severe disability premium for almost nine months. This vulnerable individual needs action. Will the Minister get a grip on this?

Justin Tomlinson: I apologise to the hon. Lady that I have not seen the letter yet. I will make sure that I do as a matter of urgency and will respond personally.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My constituent suffered severe trauma and mental illness. When he filled in his form four years ago, some mistakes were made, but those mistakes could and should have been picked up. However, he has had to wait years for money he was owed in back payments.

The problem I want to raise with the Minister is that our local Money Advice Service was not able to get a response from the DWP. It was only when my caseworkers

got involved that the £15,000 my constituent was owed was repaid. What will the Minister do to ensure that DWP staff are responding in a timely manner to Money Advice staff?

Justin Tomlinson: I am very sorry to hear about that, because what we would like to see—there are many, many cases of best practice—is local support organisations working hand in hand with local jobcentres, so that the most vulnerable claimants in particular get additional support as they go through the system.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Despite the Minister's words about paying more money, I am afraid it seems to me that he is robbing Peter to pay Paul. Given the weakness of local advice services, particularly in rural areas such as mine, will the Minister provide hon. Members with a breakdown of the geographical distribution of the 10,000 or so cases so that we can reach out properly?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman, whom I have worked with closely on other issues. To be absolutely clear, in going from the legacy benefit to universal benefit, we have not taken money out but are targeting it at the most vulnerable people. Overall, our spending on those with disabilities and long-term health conditions has increased by £5 billion per year. The key is that all jobcentres will have the support of Citizens Advice to provide additional support for claimants who want it.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): A constituent of mine who was forced on to universal credit with no protections lost a considerable amount of money to help with her living costs when her severe disability premium stopped. Now we learn that she may have to wait six months to see any money, even when the regulations are passed. How on earth are disabled people supposed to cope in the meantime?

Justin Tomlinson: The priority in our reforms is to make sure that the most vulnerable get the most support within the system. Without knowing all the details of that case, it is difficult to comment, but I am happy to look at the details.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Has the Department contacted all those who have lost out on payments? If not, when will the Department do so? Will the Minister commit to ensuring that absolutely no burden is placed on claimants in applying for back payments of the severe disability premium, and that his Department will take on the burden of gathering the available evidence to ensure that payments are made as soon as possible?

Justin Tomlinson: The judgment was given only on Friday, but we are urgently considering all the options available to us. Once we are in a position to do so, we absolutely will make sure that we communicate with all claimants.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Has the Minister not got the message that this system is not working? As has been pointed out repeatedly, it is not working. About a fortnight ago, I visited one of the biggest food banks in the west midlands. They are the ones helping people who cannot claim their benefits. Why do the Government not scrap it and start again?

Justin Tomlinson: I could not disagree more. Under the legacy benefits—the benefits the hon. Gentleman is seemingly advocating that we go back to—700,000 of the most vulnerable people, many of whom are those using the food banks, are missing out on £2.4 billion of support.

Mr Cunningham *indicated dissent.*

Justin Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman can shake his head, but these are some of the most vulnerable people. We are creating a simpler, clearer system so that those vulnerable people do not miss out on the support they are entitled to.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): It is rather frustrating that, yet again with this Government, people have had to go to court before they get some change and acknowledgement. I know and respect the Minister, as he has been very helpful to me on a number of issues. Will he just give a commitment on the Floor of the House that the DWP will ensure that anyone who has missed out on severe disability premium will have retrospective payments so that, ultimately, they get what they are entitled to?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I have enjoyed working with him on a number of issues. Obviously we only saw the judgment on Friday, and we must consider the options. The issue was additional support through the gateway, and we will have to look at that, but we remain committed to ensuring that those who are part of the full transition will receive the full support.

East Midlands Rail Franchise

3.59 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport to update the House on the bidding process for the East Midlands rail franchise.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (**Andrew Jones**): As has previously been confirmed in a written ministerial statement and at the Dispatch Box on several occasions, Abellio was awarded the contract after presenting the Department with a compliant bid, following a rigorous competition that was consistent with public procurement rules. Our assessment of bids has been comprehensive and fair and I have absolute confidence in the process. It was a fair, open competition and Abellio provided the best bid for passengers, in which it demonstrated that it would not only meet but exceed the Department's specifications. The Department's procurement process is absolutely clear: submitting a non-compliant bid that rejected the commercial terms on offer, as Stagecoach chose to do, can lead to disqualification.

We have a winner. Abellio won the competition with a compliant bid. We are currently in the standstill period, which is a standard part of procurement practice. Within that period, the Department is able to answer unsuccessful or disqualified bidders' questions, enabling them fully to understand the details of the decision that has been made. Towards the end of the standstill period, the Department received a request for further information from one of the bidders and, in view of that, we decided to extend the period until tomorrow, 8 May. After that, we will be looking forward to the mobilisation from the successful bidder, which will lead to improved services for those who use the East Midlands franchise. Abellio will invest more than £600 million in trains and stations between August this year and 2027. Meanwhile, the Government will continue their £1.5 billion upgrade of the midland main line, which is the biggest upgrade since its completion in 1870. That is part of our £48 billion investment to modernise our railways over the next five years.

Andy McDonald: During Transport questions last Thursday, the shadow rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), asked about the non-compliance of bidders for the East Midlands rail franchise. The Transport Secretary, who is not present, dismissed her questions as inaccurate and incorrect. However, according to a formal legal disclosure from the Department for Transport, which was published on 15 April and sent with the full authority of the Secretary of State,

"All bids contained some non-compliances."

The ministerial code requires Ministers to make truthful and accurate statements to Parliament, so will the Transport Secretary now correct the record and rectify the inaccurate and incorrect statement that he made to the House last week?

Given that all bidders for East Midlands were non-compliant, will the Minister tell us how the non-compliances of the respective bidders were assessed? The Department has mandatory and discretionary levers over non-

compliances in franchise bids. Can the Minister explain how the criteria were applied during the evaluation of bids for East Midlands?

The leak of the Stagecoach bid details to Abellio during the bidding casts further doubt on the integrity of the process. Why did it take months for the data-breach investigation to start and why was it so limited? Given last week's cancellation of the ferry contracts and now this latest debacle, is there not serious doubt about the Transport Secretary's ability to procure services? Will the Minister's boss sign off the East Midlands franchise contract this week, in view of the serious concerns about the transparency of the process? Given the appalling record of defending legal challenges to failed procurement decisions—Eurotunnel and P&O being cases in point—what contingency plans are there to defend future legal action against the East Midlands award?

In 2012, rail franchising went into meltdown on the west coast main line. Seven years on, it has never been clearer that it is not working and will never work. It needs to end, and to end now.

Andrew Jones: Let me deal with the hon. Gentleman's questions one at a time. In a complex procurement process such as this, or indeed in other complex public sector procurements, it is a matter of course that there may be small technical non-compliances. These could include, for example, incorrect font sizes or submitting bids in the wrong format—in docx rather than in PDF, or vice versa. This does not constitute a material non-compliance, which would affect the compliance of the bid as a whole. What would be a serious issue would be something like the reallocation of risk, or acceptance or non-acceptance of the commercial terms that have been offered. That is where the difference between material and non-material would come in.

We have been clear at the outset that non-compliance risks exclusion and Stagecoach chose to put in a materially non-compliant bid rejecting the commercial terms on offer. In doing so, it is responsible for its own disqualification.

On the bid leak, I am aware that an email was sent incorrectly by Network Rail, which was received by one of the bidders, but that has been investigated and it was proved in that investigation that the email was not opened and none of the information that was possibly within it was accessed, so it has not been material to this award.

The hon. Gentleman said that franchising is dead and buried. I could not disagree more. Franchising has been a significant part of the turnaround of our rail industry. It has led to more entrants into the market. It has led to investment from the private sector. It has led to over £10 billion of investment. It has led to a renewal of focus on customers in the rail sector. It has been an ingredient in the turnaround we have seen, with the more than doubling of passenger journeys on our railways over the past 20 and a bit years. So franchising has been a success. We of course need to evolve it because what we face now is how to take the process on to the next stages. That is the question that the Williams review has been tasked to solve.

Mr Williams is starting to give us some of his thinking. He has made speeches at various rail conferences. We look forward to receiving his report in the early summer, with a view to a White Paper in the autumn.

The comment from the hon. Gentleman was that the Secretary of State had misled the House. The Abellio bid was won in a competitive franchise process and it won with a compliant bid. The comments by the Secretary of State were, therefore, accurate. I am aware of the media story, but it is wrong. He does not need to correct the record. The Abellio bid was compliant and has been won in an open, fair and consistent way. We look forward to seeing the benefits of that for the passengers on the East Midlands network.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the rail Minister confirm that under the terms of the new franchise passengers from Kettering will enjoy the reintroduction of two trains an hour going north from Kettering, which had been taken away, extra seat capacity on the Corby to London service and the introduction of electrification to Kettering by 2020?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes, as ever, a wise point on behalf of the constituents he serves so well. The point about this franchise, and indeed all our franchises, is that they bring benefits for the travelling public. This franchise will do just that. It will be delivering more trains from Kettering, it will be delivering more seats from Corby, and the Government as a whole through their electrification of a significant part of the midland main line will be delivering the electrification that he specified. So his constituents will be receiving a better service in both quantity and quality as a result of this franchise award.

Mr Speaker: I trust the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) will go about his business with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step, buoyed by knowledge of the approbation he has received from the Minister on the Treasury Bench describing him as “wise”; I have a feeling it will be framed and appear in an important and public part of the hon. Gentleman's home.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): There will be concern in Chesterfield that the East Midlands rail service currently provided by Stagecoach will no longer be in place. In terms of what the Minister is able to tell us about the process, how many fully compliant bids were there? In terms of the process going forward, what benefits will constituents in Chesterfield see when we move to Abellio trains?

Andrew Jones: The Department wants to provide bidding feedback to those who have been unsuccessful or disqualified, but it has never given bidding feedback in public in relation to losing bids. That would not be particularly fair on those who have bid, and there are commercial confidentiality points that could have market implications, so we have never done that. I am aware that some of the bidders have made public statements themselves, but that is up to them. I do not think it is up to me. The people of Chesterfield will be able to look forward to an enhanced service. We have put out an interactive map that details the benefits for all the different areas of the franchise award. It is publicly accessible on the Department for Transport website and the hon. Gentleman might be interested in looking at that. Separately, I will of course write to him with the details of what will happen for the people of Chesterfield as a result of this franchise award.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Can the rail Minister assure me and the House that he will continue to ensure good value for money for taxpayers and for passengers, unlike Labour, which allowed fare rises of 13% during its time in government? I was once a resident of the east of England and therefore used the rails.

Andrew Jones: I am absolutely clear that we will continue to seek good value for money for fare payers and taxpayers through the franchising process. The amount of money that is being invested in our railways is at a record level, because the Government believe strongly in rail underpinning our economy and our move for clean growth. Fares are obviously a matter of some concern, but I remind my hon. Friend that we are in the sixth year of freezing fares in line with inflation, which is in marked contrast to the fare system that we inherited when we came into government. I think there were fare increases of up to 10% in the previous Government's last year. We will focus on delivering not only better value but better quality and quantity at that better value.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Never before have I heard a question on East Midlands trains that begin at St Pancras and terminate in Sheffield being asked by someone from north of the border, but the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) is always welcome to come and enjoy the midland main line.

In any event, this is a serious matter, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for raising it. As the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) said, there will be concern about this franchise and the manner in which this has been done. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) and I met Abellio on Friday, and I put that squarely on the table. I have a concern about the level of expectation. The Minister rightly speaks about new trains being introduced, about refurbishment and about bi-mode trains, but none of that will come on stream for at least three years: there are high expectations, but they will not be delivered.

My real question to the Minister is this. It is my understanding that those train doors that have to be slammed—the ones where people have to reach up through the window to turn the handle on the outside when they want to open or close the doors—are rightly going to be made unlawful in order to comply with rules, regulations and laws covering people with mobility difficulties. Can he confirm that, in order to satisfy those laws, there will have to be new trains? Can he also confirm that that cannot be done in time for January next year? In that event, what are the Government going to do?

Andrew Jones: I am sure that expectations are high; they always are higher at the start of a franchise. We have been talking about the customer benefits that will flow from the £600 million that Abellio is investing in trains and stations along the franchise. I understand the right hon. Lady's point about how benefits can sometimes be delayed, and there has, on occasion, been a sense of jam tomorrow in the delivery of timely upgrades for our railways, but this is a positive announcement and it should be welcomed as such. I recognise that change can cause challenges for people who are used to dealing

with a particular operator. That is inevitable whenever we have a change of franchise operator—[*Interruption.*] May I just make one more point, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well. Blurt it out!

Andrew Jones: Blurt it out I will. In terms of PRM compliance—compliance with regulations covering passengers with reduced mobility—I am extremely keen that all our train operating companies should have trains that are PRM compliant by the end of the year. That is the expectation that we have of them.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): East Midlands services that run from Cleethorpes extend to Lincoln and Newark. In the not-too-distant past, we used to have services through to Nottingham, Leicester and even more exotic places. Could the Minister give an assurance that Abellio will look at extending the services out of Cleethorpes? Will he urge it to ensure that they are not provided by a single unit? The services, particularly those to Lincoln, are frequently overcrowded, especially after they stop at Market Rasen in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh).

Andrew Jones: I am not sure we can describe Leicester as an exotic destination, but I understand the point that my hon. Friend is making. It is a key part of the economy and the central part of this country and its connectivity is therefore very important, as he highlights. I will have to check and have a further conversation with Abellio and then write to my hon. Friend with the answer to his question.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There have been press reports again today regarding who is responsible for pensions, particularly in relation to Virgin contracts and Stagecoach. Can the Minister clear that up? What is he trying to achieve? Who is responsible for paying the pensions?

Andrew Jones: The responsibility for paying train operator pensions is the responsibility of the train operator. That is the case with the franchises that have just been awarded and are being considered, and it has always been the case since franchising came into form 25 years ago. There are no plans to change that. Train operators have the responsibility and we expect them to fulfil it.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Is the Minister confident that the new contract will deliver positive benefits for rail users in Corby and east Northamptonshire and that the transition from the old contract to the new will be seamless?

Andrew Jones: There will be significant benefits for the constituents whom my hon. Friend serves so well. Those benefits will be in the form of new trains and significantly increased capacity, particularly with the connectivity into London. There are significant benefits for those he represents. There is obviously operational risk with the handover from one franchise to the next, but many of the staff will TUPE over, as is standard when a franchise changes. I expect all sides to go through the process with good will to ensure that customers are at the centre of their thinking.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I wonder whether there is a way to formalise this slot as an urgent question to the Secretary of State for Transport, because this is clearly a weekly event that could be formalised in the parliamentary calendar.

My question to the Minister is this: what is the Secretary of State's responsibility when it comes to making market-sensitive information available? Given how leaky the Government are, was it appropriate to leave nine days between disqualifying Stagecoach and announcing its disqualification?

Andrew Jones: After the decision has been made within the Department for Transport, there has to be a period of communication with other Departments, such as the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. That is entirely standard in public procurement. It is not a question of the Government sitting on their hands within the Department. There was a standard process. That is typical in rail franchises, as it is in other parts of public procurement. I am aware of the press story, but it is simply wrong.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The Minister will be aware that the East Midlands service between Derby, Stoke and north Staffordshire, run by East Midlands Trains, is inadequate. It is often only one carriage and overcrowded. Can he assure me that that service will be improved under the new franchise?

Andrew Jones: I can assure my hon. Friend that the service will be significantly enhanced. That enhancement will take the form of more services, particularly earlier in the day, including on a Sunday—I know he and others along that route have campaigned for that. The trains themselves will be new and much bigger. I am aware that the service is often a single carriage and is absolutely full. That is an indication of the pent-up demand along that line. That is why we will be seeing more services to meet that need.

Bombardier

4.19 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on the decision by Bombardier to sell its operations in Northern Ireland.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): Last Thursday, Bombardier Inc. announced its plans to sell its Belfast aerostructures and engineering services operations. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has spoken to Alain Bellemare, Bombardier's chief executive, and Michael Ryan, the head of its Belfast operations, about this decision.

The decision is a change of strategy for Bombardier, and we have asked the company to explain it. Bombardier has told us it is a strategic decision so that the company can focus on its transportation division, which includes trains and business jets. The company will be consolidating its aerospace assets into a single business unit with core operations in Canada, the USA and Mexico, while selling its Northern Ireland and Morocco units. Bombardier has said it will continue to be committed to rail transportation in the United Kingdom.

I recognise this is unwelcome news for the Northern Irish workforce across the company's sites in Belfast, Dunmurry, Newtownards and Newtownabbey and for their families. It is deeply regrettable that they face further uncertainty about their future. We have been assured by Bombardier that it is committed to finding the right buyer and will not rush to sell at any price. Bombardier has said it will secure a buyer that will operate responsibly and will help the buyer to achieve its full growth potential.

The Belfast plant, its expertise and its highly skilled and dedicated staff will be highly sought after, and we will be working with potential buyers to take this successful and ambitious business forward. Bombardier has committed to no further job losses at the Short Brothers factory in Belfast and has paused the redundancy process from its November 2018 restructuring announcement. The management team will still continue to drive ongoing transformation initiatives to improve productivity and increase competitiveness.

The Short Brothers factory employs around 3,600 skilled workers, with a large number of them working on the A220 aircraft joint venture programme with Airbus. It also supports a supply chain of hundreds of companies and many more jobs in the UK. Bombardier's commitment to the Short Brothers factory has transformed the business, changing it to a state-of-the-art wing factory with a healthy order book. The Belfast plant is a vital asset to the UK's world-leading aerospace sector and is a centre of excellence in advanced composites and in the design and manufacture of some of the most high-value components in aerospace manufacturing.

We are committed to helping ensure that the Belfast facility continues to be successful. Last year, when the A220 aircraft joint venture was launched, both Bombardier and Airbus made a number of important commitments to the Business Secretary, including that wing manufacturing will continue in Belfast, that the treatment of UK sites

[Andrew Stephenson]

and suppliers will be equal to that of other Bombardier and Airbus suppliers and that the strategy will be one of building on existing capabilities. I expect those commitments to be respected.

We will continue to work closely with the company, the unions and the Northern Ireland Departments while this process is under way.

Tony Lloyd: I welcome the Minister to the Front Bench. He is right to describe Bombardier as a company of vital importance. The workforce, of course, are both dedicated and highly skilled, but that of itself does not express the importance of Bombardier to the Northern Ireland economy. This is a world-class operation and an icon of Northern Ireland's capacity to deliver world-class manufacturing and production. The company represents some 10% of Northern Ireland's manufacturing output, and, as he says, it employs some 3,600 people across its different sites in Northern Ireland, but that only partially tells the story of a company with a supply chain that employs many, many more—some in Northern Ireland and some in other parts of the United Kingdom. Bombardier's decision comes as a genuine shock and will lead to potential dismay. The Minister tells us that Bombardier has made commitments to try to maintain the site's viability.

I would like to draw the House's attention to comments made by the Moroccan Industry Minister, because Morocco is in the same position as Northern Ireland in this context. Moulay Hafid Elalamy has confirmed that Bombardier's Casablanca factory operations will continue after Bombardier sells its plants. We look to the Minister to give the same kind of assurance to the people of Northern Ireland, the UK and beyond that Bombardier will make sure that the current workforce, skills base and production will continue unscathed.

In that context, the Minister has told us that conversations have taken place between the Secretary of State and Bombardier's management. Will the Minister tell us whether there are plans to meet the representatives of the workforce—the trade unions involved? They are particularly keen—I agree with them on this—that the Secretary of State should hold a summit involving all the key partners, not simply the company and the workforce, but other stakeholders, including Members of this House and others elsewhere. It is important that a combined effort across Northern Ireland is made to ensure that we salvage what is proper from this announcement. Can the Minister, once again, establish that Bombardier will be sold as a total going concern? It matters enormously that we do not see a vulture company coming in, stripping its assets and its workforce and denuding both Northern Ireland and the UK of the Bombardier capacity.

Those with a good memory will recall that when Short Brothers, the predecessor company, was in public ownership, public money went into this site. What is the legacy of that public money? Can the Minister give assurances that Bombardier is committed to making sure that there is proper legacy for its workforce in Northern Ireland? Will consideration be given by his colleagues, probably those in the Treasury, as to whether enhanced funding should be provided for the Belfast

city deal? Obviously, this announcement will create pressures on the Belfast city region and the people who live there.

The final point I wish to make to the Minister is a simple one. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland cannot be with us today, for perfectly valid reasons—she is hosting five-party talks in Northern Ireland—but it is important that this Government do everything they can to see the Northern Ireland Executive back in operation. Were the Executive in place today, this would make both the Minister's task and the future of Bombardier much less complicated.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for the tone of his remarks, and I agree with him completely on the importance of Bombardier. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that it is a jewel in the crown of not only Northern Irish manufacturing, but the whole UK aerospace sector. It is therefore vital that we all work together to do everything we can to ensure the future of this site and its workforce.

The hon. Gentleman posed a range of questions that I wish to touch on. I am more than happy to meet the unions and workers' representatives to talk about this issue, and to visit Northern Ireland to see what we can do. It is important that we find the right buyer for this company, which has a good order book and is profitable. Like other companies in the aerospace sector, it has huge growth potential in the coming years. I will not rehearse the statistics now, but they show huge growth potential in the aerospace sector, and Bombardier is well positioned to capitalise on it.

The Government continue to work to support the wider Northern Irish economy. A heads of terms agreement for the Belfast city deal was agreed by the UK Government, Northern Irish government and Belfast regional partners in March 2019. The Belfast region city deal will see the UK Government invest £350 million into the Belfast region over the next 15 years. In addition, work is ongoing between the UK Government and local partners on a funding announcement for a Londonderry/Derry regional city deal. As has been said, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is not here—obviously, she is doing good work in Northern Ireland at the moment—but I stand ready to work with her and other Ministers to ensure that all necessary support is given to the workers at this site going forward.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee paid a visit to the Belfast plant of Bombardier last November during which we saw a highly skilled workforce carrying out fantastic work in the manufacture of aircraft wings with a high level of expertise. We also saw the benefits of the £2.7 billion investment that has been made in the plant since 1989. Does the Minister agree that it is important to reassure not only customers of Bombardier, which provides for the families of aircraft that Bombardier itself produces, but external customers such as Airbus with its A220 programme?

Andrew Stephenson: I agree that this site is very much a going concern. Bombardier has made it clear that it will look for the right buyer for this site. It does not intend to close it. As part of a strategic overview of its business, it has decided that this site, along with the

Morocco site, should go up for sale. The Government have worked consistently with the site, and, since 2017, more than £20 million has been invested in research and development activity at the Belfast plant to develop new products and to improve efficiency.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I had the privilege of visiting Bombardier last year as part of an Industry and Parliament Trust delegation. I was blown away both by the scale of the plant and by the highly specialised processes that were being undertaken there. Three thousand six hundred jobs is a massive figure. To put that in context, that represents 4.5% of the entire workforce in Northern Ireland, and when we take into account the supply chain, the figure becomes even greater.

According to Bombardier, Brexit is not a factor in the decision to sell the business, but when we were there on that visit, concerns were raised about Brexit and the impact of the removal of the UK from the single market and customs union. Whether or not Brexit had a role to play in this decision, the current situation will affect the search for a new owner. Airbus wings are built by Bombardier, and Tom Enders, the chief executive of Airbus, has said that the UK's aerospace sector now stands at the precipice and that Brexit uncertainty is a disgrace. Is the Minister listening to the message from the site's key customer and is he doing everything in his power to ensure that the UK does remain within the single market and customs union? Is he aware of any firm willing to purchase the site?

Finally, what steps is he taking to protect this highly skilled workforce, and how will he ensure that these skilled workers remain in Northern Ireland?

Andrew Stephenson: I have been assured that Bombardier is committed to finding the right buyer for the site. It has said that it will find one that will operate responsibly and help the company to achieve its full growth potential. The Belfast plant, its expertise and highly skilled and dedicated staff will be highly sought after and the Government will work with potential buyers to take this successful and ambitious business forward. Bombardier is a global business that operates in 28 sites across the world and it has made it clear that Brexit was not a factor in this decision.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given the world-class technical skills of the Northern Ireland workforce, is the Minister optimistic that the right buyer can be found? Given the continued railway expansion in this country and the need for more rolling stock, does he welcome Bombardier's continued commitment to the railway sector?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. This will be a highly sought after company, and I imagine that there will be a range of people interested in buying the site. Bombardier has made it very clear that, in terms of its other divisions in the UK, particularly in rolling stock, it intends to stay firmly involved in the provision of new rolling stock, and I look forward to visiting Bombardier's facility on Thursday.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am co-chair of the all-party manufacturing group and very heavily involved in air safety. Is not the news today about Bombardier a disaster for British industry and

British aerospace? This is a prime globally known company and a prime contractor of Airbus, and the news today is a sign of what is happening in high-tech industries and the car industry: they are moving out of Britain and taking out their investment. This is a disaster. Every Minister should be aware that this is not a canary singing, but a canary falling off its perch.

Andrew Stephenson: Like other companies in the growing aerospace sector, Bombardier is transforming itself. In 2015—way before Brexit—the company announced a five-year plan to transform the business to reduce costs and to improve profitability and competitiveness, while also launching commercial and business jet programmes. Bombardier has been very clear that the decision to sell off the Northern Irish site and the Morocco site—definitely nothing to do with Brexit—has nothing to do with Brexit.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an opportunity for UK-owned and UK-based companies to re-enter the major civilian aerospace sector, and that this is not just an opportunity to see it sold to some foreign-based buyer? It is our second biggest manufacturing sector after the automotive sector, and we now have the opportunity to see it come back into British hands.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. This is a golden opportunity for a number of businesses in the sector and for businesses that want to expand into the sector. It is a growing, profitable business that would make a sensible investment for anyone.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for raising this question and pay tribute to Members across the House who have shown support over the last number of years for Bombardier in my constituency and the constituencies of the hon. Member for Watford (Richard Harrington) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry); I particularly thank them for their commitment over many years.

I also thank the Minister for taking an interest in this case. I was very grateful to the Secretary of State for his phone call on Thursday and recognise the commitment that he has shown to this key part of our industry in Northern Ireland—and, indeed, to the UK aviation sector—over the last period.

The Minister knows the importance of Bombardier and its significance to our economy. Can he therefore assure us that he will maintain the jobs in Belfast and surrounding areas, the industry, the innovation and the skill that we are benefiting from and that the whole world will?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. He is a huge champion for his constituents and all the workers at the site. My constituency of Pendle is dominated by the aerospace sector and is home to a large Rolls-Royce fan blade factory, so I know the importance of these highly skilled and well-paid aerospace jobs. I will do everything I can, working with the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends, to ensure that we secure all the jobs at the Bombardier Belfast site.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the substantial investment that Bombardier has recently made in Biggin Hill, where its new business aircraft service centre is creating many opportunities for young people in the London Borough of Bromley?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is correct to point out that Bombardier is a growing company that is investing in different sectors; it is just strategically realigning itself. I look forward to visiting a different Bombardier site on Thursday—not the one my hon. Friend mentioned—to talk about other investments within the UK. The decision to sell its operations in Northern Ireland is regrettable, but we will work with the company to ensure that the right buyer is found.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Members will recall that the American Government took legal action against Bombardier about 18 months ago, so how big a part did the United States play in this decision? The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) said that this affects 4.5% of the workforce in Northern Ireland, but we can multiply that figure by two or three if we include the supply chain as well, so the problem is much bigger than people realise. We had a similar statement on GKN a couple of weeks ago; is the Minister being conned on this?

Andrew Stephenson: Bombardier has told us that this is a strategic decision so that the company can focus on its transportation division, which includes trains and business jets. We have been told that it has not been influenced by any other factors. This is a strategic decision by the company so that it can focus on certain key parts of its core operation.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister described the strategic realignment that Bombardier has spoken about, but he has also no doubt spoken to ADS—on behalf of the aerospace industry—and heard about the huge concern that exists in aerospace manufacturing about the fact that the Government are unable to come up with a permanent customs arrangement or even to get a deal through this Parliament. Given all the discussions he has had, what impact will the Government's current Brexit position have on the likelihood of these Bombardier jobs being secured and a new buyer found?

Andrew Stephenson: The large aerospace businesses I have talked to—including Rolls-Royce, which has a plant in my constituency—have been very clear that MPs should vote for the deal, and I am proud that I voted for it three times.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I accept that there is not very much the Government can do, but will the Minister set out what it might be possible to do in identifying or facilitating the identification of any new buyer? On retraining, although hopefully that will not be necessary, what sort of package might the Government be willing to put in place if it does prove necessary in future?

Andrew Stephenson: At the current time, we are going to be focused on finding the right buyer. We will work across government to ensure that the right buyer is found.

If there are already existing purchasers involved, that is commercially sensitive and something for the company.

I very much hope that we never have to look at any sort of retraining package for the site. Obviously, if we did I would come back to the House on it. However, this is a growing, profitable business—one of the jewels in the crown of UK aerospace—and I would imagine that buyers for this site are lining up to invest in the jobs and skills in Northern Ireland.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): One of the finest visits I had the honour of making when I was a business Minister was to this remarkable factory in Belfast. I went with the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). They are indeed a highly skilled workforce making a world-class product. It was remarkable to see those wings being made. Does the Minister not agree, though, that British aerospace has basically been built on the fact that we are a member of the European Union, that any potential buyer will surely not be attracted even to the brilliant workforce with this outstanding product when we leave—if we leave—the European Union, and that the truth and reality is now dawning on many people that the best deal with the European Union is the deal that we currently have?

Andrew Stephenson: No, I would respectfully disagree. I think we need to provide certainty for all sectors of our economy. We have seen a range of recent investments in the aerospace sector across the United Kingdom, but we have also seen businesses restructure, as in this business with huge growth potential, as the sector looks to realign itself for the growth potentials in future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose—*

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: What a difficult choice—Strangford against East Antrim. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I thank the Minister for his reply to these questions. I represent Strangford, as Mr Speaker said and others here will know as well. The factory in Newtownards is part of the Bombardier business, and I want to speak on its behalf. Last year, I had an opportunity to visit the Belfast site in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and to understand its importance and the experience of its skilled workforce. It seems that there are three companies interested in Bombardier. Has the Minister had time to discuss the possibility of a partnership with Airbus, with Airbus owning 50.1% of the shares, thereby cementing the wing technology in the United Kingdom, and 49.9% owned by Bombardier, with voting shares retained by Bombardier? That is very similar to the partnership in the Airbus C Series, now the Airbus A320.

Mr Speaker: I do hope that the hon. Gentleman now feels that he has fully ventilated his concerns, at least for now.

Andrew Stephenson: Any discussions that are ongoing between Bombardier and potential buyers are of course commercially sensitive. However, one would imagine that a company like Airbus, which is so reliant on this

excellent company providing so many components to it, would be taking an active interest in the company and how it goes forward.

Sammy Wilson: I bet you wish you had chosen me the first time, Mr Speaker.

The people of Northern Ireland appreciate the political and financial commitments that Governments of all shades in this House have given over the years to keeping aircraft manufacturing alive in Northern Ireland. Bombardier's lease was due to be renewed this year. When it was privatised, a peppercorn rent was made available for the site—it is a very land-intensive industry—which is a fraction of a per cent. of what the commercial rent would be. That could be a deal breaker when it comes to the sale of the site. What discussions has the Minister had, or will he have, with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners about setting a level of rent that ensures that operations can continue on the site?

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman was not to be outdone by his hon. Friend.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. Three weeks into the job, I have not had any conversations with them yet, but I look forward to doing so because, as he says, that could be very worthwhile as we look to secure the future of this company and all those whose livelihoods depend on it.

Places of Worship: Security Funding

4.45 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about security in our places of worship. Yesterday marked the start of Ramadan, a peaceful time of prayer and reflection. Throughout the holy month, Muslims will come together in mosques to celebrate. The tragic events in Christchurch, New Zealand, will never be far from their minds, and the 51 innocent souls who were slaughtered in March will be remembered in many prayers. A terrorist gunned down these Muslim men, women and children as they prayed. A few weeks later, Christians were massacred by terrorists in Sri Lankan churches as they observed their faith on Easter Sunday. More victims were targeted in hotels, with a total of over 250 lives lost. Just days ago, a gunman stormed a synagogue near San Diego, killing an innocent woman on the last day of Passover. Each one of those atrocities was heartbreaking and tragic, and my thoughts are with every single person who has been affected. I know that the House will join me in condemning these hate-fuelled attacks on our freedom and values.

This slaughter has sent shockwaves through our religious communities. People are understandably worried. Many members of my own family contacted me after Christchurch to seek reassurance. They asked, "Just what are you doing to stop this happening here?" With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to answer that and provide some much-needed reassurance.

There can be no doubt that people have been targeted because of their religion in terrorist attacks around the world, but also in vile hate crimes on the streets of this country—sledgehammer attacks on mosques, a Christian preacher spat at in the street, and a brick thrown through the glass door of a synagogue. I condemn all these attacks with every fibre of my being. No one should be targeted because of what they believe. Everyone, of every faith, deserves the right to observe their religion without fear, and we are doing all we can to ensure that this remains the case in the UK and that our fundamental values are preserved.

Mr Speaker, allow me to update the House on some of the work that is under way to protect our religious freedom. First, I have increased the places of worship protective security fund to £1.6 million for 2019-20—double the amount awarded last year. Expressions of interest are now open for the next round of the fund, which will open in July. Since the scheme launched in 2016, more than £1.5 million has been awarded, with 63 grants to churches, 49 to mosques, five to Hindu temples and 16 to gurdwaras. They have paid for security equipment such as CCTV, security lighting, new locks or fences. Many more places of worship will now benefit after we made it even easier to apply this year, by removing the need to find multiple quotes and contractors. A separate £14 million grant also provides security for Jewish schools and synagogues against terror attacks.

Secondly, a new £5 million fund will provide security training for places of worship across England and Wales. This funding will support the physical security measures provided by the places of worship fund. It will share best practice and help faith organisations to understand how best to protect their worshippers.

[Sajid Javid]

Thirdly, we are consulting religious communities on what more can and should be done to help them. We will shortly announce a programme of engagement, to help us understand what they need and how to make it work in a faith setting. This listening exercise will inform how the £5 million security training fund is spent to ensure that it is effective and will help ascertain how we can best protect worshippers.

Fourthly, we are providing immediate help with a Ramadan package of support for mosques. We know that Muslims are anxious for their safety after the atrocity in Christchurch, and that tensions are heightened during religious festivals. So we are supporting Faith Associates to provide security training and advice for the Islamic holy month. Support is being given in 12 workshops around England and Wales, and guidance is being distributed to over 2,000 mosques, community centres and madrassahs.

Finally, our world-class police provide a vital protection role to all places of worship. Patrols near mosques were stepped up following the Christchurch attack to provide much-needed reassurance and the police have increased activity around religious festivals and holy days, including the Ramadan period. Our security services work tirelessly to disrupt all terror threats known to this country. This includes tackling the growing threat from the far right, with more than four such terrorist plots disrupted since the beginning of 2017. We are also using a range of other powers to tackle the threat of terrorism and extremism in this country. Our robust hate crime legislation has seen far-right influencers jailed for a range of offences, including religiously aggravated harassment. As Home Secretary, I can exclude foreign nationals from entering the UK if I believe that their presence would not be conducive to the public good—a power that I can and do use to stop hate preachers stirring up tension here. I have used that power eight times since I became Home Secretary.

Our Prevent and Building a Stronger Britain Together programmes work with and through local communities to challenge terrorist or extremist ideologies from Islamist to the far right.

Together, this comprehensive package of support provides protection for all our places of worship. We know that there are deep and genuine concerns in religious communities; we know that people are feeling vulnerable and scared, but have no doubt that I am listening to these concerns and we are responding. The diversity of this country and our shared values of tolerance and respect are what make us truly great. We will never allow those who seek to divide us to win. The freedom to practise any religion or none is a cornerstone of our democratic society. People must have the peace of mind to worship without fear, and I am doing everything within my power to make this possible. I commend this statement to the House.

4.52 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for prior sight of his statement. The Opposition welcome his statement in principle, particularly the Ramadan package. We are aware that there is particular fear in some of our

communities as we enter the period of Ramadan. However, we reserve the right to return to the subject as the detail of implementation becomes clear.

Across the world we are seeing a rise in terror attacks especially on people in their place of worship. The House should contemplate what it means to be gathered together to pray to your God and find yourself a victim of murder and terrorism. In Sri Lanka we saw more than 200 people die, including hundreds of people at Easter services in Christian churches. We all saw the images of the terrorist entering the church with the rucksack on his back, patting a small child on the head and then proceeding to blow up the innocent worshippers.

This followed the terror attacks in Christchurch on Muslim worshippers, which claimed the lives of 50 people and injured 40 more. The attack was livestreamed on Facebook. Most recently, a gunman stormed a synagogue, killing an innocent woman on the last day of Passover. The concern must be that, in this era of online, when someone can literally livestream their terror, there is a danger of copycat incidents. That is one of the things that has inspired fear in different communities.

On this side of the House, we want to make it clear that these terror attacks are murderous and vile, whether they come from admirers of al-Qaeda or ISIS or from admirers of tinpot Adolf Hitlers. As we move towards the European elections, sadly, we may well see a rise in far right activity, which may seek to mirror some of the terrorist attacks that we have seen. That is why we believe that this statement is timely and to be welcomed.

These terror attacks spread ripples of violence throughout communities and countries. The Metropolitan police report that racist and religious hate crimes in London hit their highest levels in a year immediately following the Christchurch mosque shootings. Tell MAMA, the Muslim community organisation, said that there was an almost sixfold increase in reports to its monitoring service immediately after the Christchurch attack. Separately, the Community Security Trust also reports rising incidents. My own Haredi Jewish community in Stamford Hill have seen a steep rise in attacks; sadly, they do not always report them to the police, although I am working with them to encourage them to go to the authorities after all such incidents. There have been similar reports from police forces and monitoring community organisations across the country.

The proposals that the Home Secretary has announced are both timely and appropriate, but we will follow up some of the measures. For instance, the Opposition will wish to know where the worship protection security fund is being allocated, and which organisations have applied for and been awarded the funding. My experience is that sometimes those who obtain Government funding are better at putting in applications, rather than necessarily being the organisations in most need.

We will want to know about where the £5 million fund to provide security training for places of worship is allocated—that the money is going to the appropriate communities in appropriate parts of the country. We will be interested to hear from Ministers about their consultations with religious communities and will want to know who is able to access and benefit from the Ramadan package of support for mosques. We are not accusing Ministers of bad faith, but we are saying that all too often, when it comes to allocating such funding,

the people who know about it and are skilled at making applications benefit, although they may not necessarily be the most vulnerable and needy communities.

We welcome the fact that the police are providing vital protection to all places of worship, although I say gently to the Home Secretary that the situation is not helped by the cuts in police numbers since 2010. Our main point is that nobody should have to go to their place of worship and feel fear. Nobody should feel that horrible incidents such as we have seen internationally may be reflected in their mosque, church or gurdwara. We also say that some Muslim community centres are next to mosques; we hope that they can get some help, support and protection also.

The terrorist incidents that we have been seeing are both frightening and tragic. We as a House must assure vulnerable communities of our intent to support them, whether financially or in other ways. I welcome the Home Secretary's statement, but he can be assured that we will be following up how it actually unfolds in practice.

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for the tone of her remarks and for her support. I think it is reassuring for members of the public watching or listening to know that everyone in this House is united in the determination to protect people in all places of worship, whatever their faith, in every way we can. I very much welcome her comments.

The right hon. Lady rightly started by condemning the recent terrorist attacks around the world—in Christchurch, Sri Lanka and San Diego. She was also right to make a link between those attacks and what she called the ripple effect—the rise in recorded hate crime that we have sadly seen here in our own country. I know she shares our absolute determination to ensure we do everything we can where hate crime is reported. People must always feel that they can go ahead and report that crime. Letting the police know enables them to investigate it and take action.

The right hon. Lady said she would follow up on the package, and I hope she does. That is exactly what I would expect of her and I very much welcome it. She is very good at following up on things. That will help us, working together, to ensure we are doing all we can to support our communities. She was right to raise the issue of how we can ensure the fund is allocated as quickly and as efficiently as possible. That is why I referred in my statement to changes I am making to the application rules. In the past the fund has, I think, required at least three estimates for putting up CCTV from different certified contractors. I think we can simplify the rules. We are doing that and it will help to make it more straightforward.

The right hon. Lady raised the £5 million that I announced for training. I think we have a collective desire to ensure it is utilised quickly, properly and efficiently, and that all communities and all faith groups feel they have access and support. That is exactly why we have already started the consultation with faith groups, community representatives and others to make sure we are listening to them about the best way to use the £5 million.

All of us in this House share a determination to ensure that people in our country can worship without fear. We will do everything we can to make that a reality.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I very much welcome the Home Secretary's statement and the action he has taken on this very important matter. This issue is not just about buildings. People of faith live out their faith day in, day out in their homes and in their communities, so will he confirm that he will continue to do all he can to ensure we remain an open and tolerant society, and that the principles of freedom of faith, freedom of worship and freedom of speech will continue to be upheld for people of every faith?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He is right to highlight that this is not just about buildings—bricks and mortar—but the environment that people feel exists for them to practise and talk about their faith. The Prevent programme is there to safeguard young people against being drawn into extremism. There are a number of groups that both my Department and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government work with to try to create the all-important environment that gives people the freedom and security to practise their faith, no matter what that faith is.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I join him and the shadow Home Secretary in condemning the hate-filled attacks he referred to. I echo what they both said about the sanctity of places of worship. Everybody should be able to practise and observe their religion without fear. Any sensible measure that will help to make that happen is to be welcomed. Listening to what our religious communities need is paramount, so I welcome in particular what he said about consultation. It is a tragedy that we are having to have this discussion on how to protect places of worship in 2019. One reason we are having to do so is that online space has been ruthlessly exploited by those who would peddle hate and encourage such attacks.

The SNP welcomes the fact that the Government have published a White Paper on online harms, but we cannot wait for legislative reform. It seems that we are still struggling to come up with a complete and co-ordinated response that addresses how to police online hate. It is a question partly of resourcing, partly of improving co-ordination—both internationally and among the police forces of the United Kingdom—and partly of drawing on expertise. Does the Home Secretary accept that we need more of all those things?

The ongoing review of the Prevent strategy is much needed. Some of what happens through the strategy is effective, but more can be done to build community trust and increase the strategy's effectiveness. One criticism that has been made is that the strategy has never been fully tailored to addressing the dangers posed by the far right. Can the Home Secretary assure me that all the expertise and knowledge available are being fully exploited so that strategies to tackle the far right are having the maximum possible impact?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of online space and how to ensure that we do all we can to stop online platforms being used to preach hate. I am glad that he welcomes our White Paper, which I think it is fair to say is groundbreaking among all countries with respect to taking action—many countries are looking at how we are planning to handle the issue. The duty of care will make a difference.

[Sajid Javid]

The hon. Gentleman is also right to make the point that we cannot wait. Naturally, the consultation and legislation will take time, but it is good to see that some social media companies are already responding. I met several of them with fellow G7 Interior Ministers just last month, and they have pledged to take further action after the attack in Christchurch. That is good to see; I encourage them to do all they can now instead of waiting for legislation.

We are pleased to be having a review of the Prevent programme, because such independent reviews can help to build community confidence. It is also important for the review to look at how to stop far-right extremism; I can tell the hon. Gentleman that last year almost a quarter of Prevent programme referrals related to far-right extremism.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement and for his commitment to the security of places of worship. Will he join me in thanking our police and security services? They are the ones who work day in, day out to prevent attacks and we owe them a great deal. In other countries, police and security services are often used to clamp down on religious freedom; in our country, they are there to uphold it—and they do.

Sajid Javid: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in commending our police and security services for their invaluable work. We must remember just how many lives they have saved. It is already public knowledge that since the beginning of 2017, they have prevented or foiled 17 terrorist attacks, including four by the far right, that would almost certainly have led to loss of life. We owe a great debt to our security services and police.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for his statement and for his reassurance at the time of Ramadan and at a time when we have seen such awful attacks on churches, mosques and synagogues around the world. He is right to be very clear that no one should ever be in fear as a result of following their faith.

Will the Home Secretary clarify whether the funding that he announced today is a further development from the announcements in March? Will he say what is being done to address online radicalisation and online religious hate crimes? The Select Committee on Home Affairs has heard some very concerning evidence about those matters, both in our private session this afternoon and in public sessions over previous weeks. In particular, what action is he aware of to tackle the closed Facebook groups that still have huge numbers of members and about which there are real concerns that religious hate crimes are being pursued?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. She asks whether the funding is new, further to what was announced soon after the atrocity in Christchurch. The £1.6 million for places of worship is not new, although there is more detail available on it today; I also announced the £5 million for training at the time. What is new today is the Ramadan package.

Like other colleagues, the right hon. Lady expressed her concern about how online platforms are being used. In particular, she mentioned Facebook. When legislation

is in place, it will naturally be easier to take action. However, as I have said, there is action that online platforms can take today, including on closed groups. There has been a welcome increase in engagement, but I do not feel that it has been enough. I think more can be achieved by working with our international partners, who are taking this matter seriously.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I welcome the statement. The Home Secretary will be unsurprised to learn that I welcome the Ramadan package, as I was one of over 90 colleagues who wrote on behalf of our mosques to ask for extra protection during the holy month. I very much appreciate the announcement.

As the Secretary of State for Education is on the Treasury Bench, may I also raise the concerns that my constituents have expressed about safety around schools? In particular, Muslim mothers in traditional dress are highly visible as they collect or drop off children and are often vulnerable to abuse and hate attacks. Will the Home Secretary work with his colleague to advise and support schools to ensure that children and parents are safe whenever they attend school premises?

Sajid Javid: I support what the hon. Lady said about the Ramadan package and the work that she has done with her community and others to raise the issue. She is also right to raise the issue of schools. I mentioned in my statement that there is £14 million of support for the Jewish community, as there should be. Most of that is for Jewish schools. It is right that we take a fresh look at other schools and religious establishments where people of certain faiths gather. Schools and community centres would be included in that. I have asked my officials for further advice to make sure that we look at this issue again in the light of the recent terrorist attacks that we have seen internationally. I know that the Secretary of State for Education shares my determination to make sure that we are doing all that we can by working together.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary strongly for his statement, especially in the light of the horrific attacks on mosques in Christchurch, churches across Sri Lanka and the synagogue in San Diego. I strongly welcome his words on hate crime, on which we need to take more action. Will he confirm for the House that all faith communities across the UK will be eligible to apply for this package of funding and support? Will account be taken of specific threats against particular communities, such as the Jewish community or the Ahmadi Muslim community, when applications are made?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I can confirm all those points for the right hon. Gentleman. On the places of worship scheme, the £5 million for security training is available to all faiths. I encourage any faith group or organisation that feels that that could help to apply. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned different parts of the Muslim community. We want to make sure that we consult all different viewpoints in each faith and take their concerns into account.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I too welcome the Home Secretary's statement. I align myself with his words and those of the shadow Home Secretary against the murderous, vile, horrific, cowardly attacks against

our faith communities. The thoughts and prayers of Members of this House continue to be with those who tragically lost their lives—men, women and children.

I want clarity on the Ramadan package in particular. As the Home Secretary knows, the holy month of Ramadan has begun. Many Muslims watching this statement will naturally be very anxious about the security of their mosques and other places during this holy month. Given that we only have a matter of days, how will the Ramadan package work in practice? How quickly will the money and security be available to those faith places?

Sajid Javid: I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments. On the Ramadan package in particular, we are working with an organisation called Faith Associates, which has experience in this area. It is planning to hold a series of workshops across England and Wales with firms and in the community, and is also working on guidance that will be issued to the 2,000 mosques, Muslim schools and community groups. That is the first part of the package, but we want to align it with the other parts of what I have announced today. If as a result of that engagement an organisation feels that it needs to apply for enhanced security, we will consider it as part of the places of worship scheme, and if it feels that it could benefit from the training package, we will consider that as well.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): There is huge religious diversity in my constituency. Concern has been expressed not only about local incidents but, obviously, about the global terror incidents that we have seen. There has been some concern about the length of time between March and the availability of the new funding in July. Given what the Home Secretary has just said about the Ramadan package and given that we are already in the month of Ramadan, will he tell us whether any of those workshops have taken place yet, and whether, to his knowledge, that guidance has been distributed?

I remain deeply concerned about the neo-Nazi, extreme-right organisations that are targeting communities throughout the United Kingdom, especially Muslim and Jewish communities. Can the Home Secretary update me on the organisation System Resistance Network, which has been active in my south Wales constituency? It is simply an offshoot of National Action, and I have called for it to be proscribed.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman has asked me specifically about the workshops in the Ramadan package, and about the guidance. If he will allow me, I will write to him, because I do not have the information to hand. As for the proscription of groups, whatever type of terrorism or extremism they preach, we take that incredibly seriously. The hon. Gentleman will know that ours was the first Government to proscribe a far-right organisation, National Action. If any proscribed organisation comes up with aliases or tries to get around the rules, we take that very seriously as well.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for what he has said this afternoon.

I encourage all places of worship in my constituency, including churches and mosques, to access this money, but on Saturday we will have our third Big Iftar in the

town square in Batley. What training would there be for a public event like that, and how swiftly could someone who applied for it gain access to it?

Sajid Javid: The £5 million training fund was announced in the week after the atrocity in Christchurch, and we are trying to make it available as soon as possible. During our early discussions with some members of the community, we talked about what would be the best way to use that fund, and how it should be focused. The hon. Lady asked me about a specific event that will take place very soon. I gathered that she would attend that event, or had been invited. I think it is great that Members of Parliament are supporting iftars around the country. I will check on whether the training will be available in time for the event in the hon. Lady's constituency, and if she will allow me, I will write to her.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Home Secretary's package is welcome, but he will know that the best way to prevent attacks is to ensure that we have strong, intelligence-led policing. What is his view of the capacity of police forces to engage further in the assessment of potential far-right and terrorist activity? In particular, will he look at the issue of closed Facebook groups, which was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)? In those groups, people continue to communicate with each other but the content cannot be seen by the police or the outside world, which can lead to attacks.

Sajid Javid: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the issue of closed groups on social media—the more private groups—is being taken seriously, and is being looked at. He also asked about intelligence. As he will know, the gathering of intelligence on potential terrorist activities is led by Counter Terrorism Policing, a national policing command working with police forces across the country, together with the domestic Security Service. Its budget has been increased significantly over the last three to four years, and it remains an absolute priority to ensure that it has all the resources that it needs to gather that intelligence.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The London Borough of Redbridge has one of the most diverse communities in the country, with gurdwaras, Hindu temples, mosques, Buddhist viharas and churches of all kinds. We also have a very active faith forum. Will the Home Secretary encourage his officials to do more to pursue a policy of interfaith dialogue and co-operation because, ultimately, it is through understanding and co-operation that we will deal with these problems?

Sajid Javid: I strongly agree. It is important to point out the work the hon. Gentleman does as the representative of the local community through the faith forum, and the work of organisations that both my Department and my former Department, the Communities Department, have supported. In my Department, the Building a Stronger Britain Together programme supports over 50 different projects across the country, many of which focus on promoting interfaith dialogue, which is incredibly important to stop hate crimes in future.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): How effective does the Home Secretary feel the Prevent strategy and the counter-terrorist strategy are?

Sajid Javid: The Prevent strategy is incredibly important for our counter-terrorism and counter-extremism work, but it is right that we periodically review it. The review of Prevent that is taking place now is important to learn lessons to see whether improvements can be made. But it also helps to build confidence in the whole strategy.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a practical, basic level, one of the most important ways of ensuring security is to make sure that places of worship are adequately staffed with people in positions of authority who can be alert to threats, so will the Secretary of State urgently review his decision to prevent ministers of religion from applying for tier 5 religious worker visas, which is already putting huge pressure on Christian churches and other faith communities ensuring that they have an adequate supply of cover for ministers over the summer?

Sajid Javid: We are absolutely right to have a visa route for religious workers, which as the hon. Gentleman has identified is the tier 5 route, and it is important for us to make sure that at all times it is working appropriately. I think it is. If the hon. Gentleman thinks improvements can be made, I will be happy to hear them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Four Members whose surnames begin with an S. I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I listened carefully to what the Home Secretary said. I am a former parliamentary church warden at St Margaret's and a lay canon at Wakefield cathedral, and of course I know from recent reports that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world at the moment. I spoke to fellow worshippers at my church on Sunday. They were very concerned about security of religion and security of churches and meetings. Does the Secretary of State agree that we have a tradition of open churches and open mosques, with people wandering in and perhaps saying quiet prayers during the day, and open access? Can we make sure we get the balance right? When there was terrorism that pinpointed aircraft, there was an immediate reaction, and a great deal of money flowed into security and protection. I do not see the urgency in the Home Secretary's message to the House today that there is a real, imminent threat to religious worship in this country.

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of Christians who are being persecuted worldwide. That is why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary was right to appoint the Bishop of Truro to look into this and report back to the House. There has been an interim report and there will be a full report later this year. The non-governmental organisation Open Doors estimates that there are almost 245 million persecuted Christians around the world, which shows the seriousness of this issue. The hon. Gentleman is also right to make the point about open churches and open

mosques. In my own constituency I have seen churches that want to welcome anyone of any faith to come in and have a cup of tea and to meet people and members of the community. It is important that that is maintained. If it is not, the terrorists win. We must not let that happen.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I, too, would welcome clarity on the application criteria and on the allocation of funds. I know that Ramadan has only just started, but may I gently say to the Home Secretary that it would have been useful to know about the Ramadan fund prior to Ramadan? Finally, would he consider extending the criteria for the security fund to include such things as religious after-school clubs and madrassahs, which are not covered by the existing criteria but could be equally vulnerable?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady makes some important suggestions. This is exactly why we have launched the consultation already. We have been talking to members of various faith groups and communities and listening to them to find out how we can ensure that the existing funds are well targeted and made as easy to access as possible, as well as to learn whether more needs to be done.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There is a shortage of dedicated prayer space for Muslim communities, especially in London, where land and buildings are expensive, and Friday prayers often take place in community buildings, which, by definition, are open and therefore more vulnerable. Will the money, the training and the workshops that the Home Secretary has talked about be available in those circumstances where there is no dedicated place of worship?

Sajid Javid: The whole point of this funding is to ensure that it works for the communities and faith groups that it is intended to help. It must be flexible enough to try to meet those needs. That is exactly why we are working with and consulting faith groups to ensure that those needs are met.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the commitment made by the Home Secretary. Hate crimes based on religion were at record levels last year, partly due to antisemitism and to Islamophobic incidents. While security is absolutely necessary, I believe that there is a need for a two-pronged approach, so can he tell the House what has been done to promote freedom of religious belief more generally, so that there would be no need for extra security at places of worship?

Sajid Javid: I think the hon. Gentleman speaks for every Member of this House, and I wish we did not have to have a statement like this today because none of us felt that we needed to provide protection for places of worship. Sadly, that is not the case and I know he agrees that we are absolutely right to focus on this. At the same time, we need to continue to ensure that our laws and regulations and the environment for religious worship are as strong as they can be, and I hope that today's announcement will help to give reassurance to people of all faiths that, where protection is needed, it will be provided.

Timpson Review of School Exclusion

5.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the publication of the Timpson review on school exclusions.

Last March, the Government commissioned Edward Timpson to explore how headteachers use exclusion and why some groups of pupils are more likely to be excluded than others. The review and the Government's response are published today and I have placed copies in the House Libraries. The Timpson review is thorough and extensive, and I want to thank Edward and all those he worked with during the review, including schools, local authorities, parents, carers and children.

Exclusion rates have risen over recent years, but they are lower than they were a decade ago, and permanent exclusion—expulsion—remains a rare event: 85% of all mainstream schools did not expel any children in the academic year 2016-17. Edward Timpson's review found excellent practice across the school system but also variation across different schools, local authorities and groups of children. The Government agree with Edward Timpson's conclusion that there is no "right" level of exclusion that we should aim for, but we need to examine why there are differences in exclusion rates for pupils with different characteristics and in different places.

I want teachers to be free to teach and pupils to be free to learn in a safe and ordered environment, so I absolutely support headteachers when they conclude that they need to suspend a pupil in response to poor behaviour or to expel them as a last resort. But it is vital that we support schools to give pupils at risk of exclusion the best chance to succeed, and ensure that, for those children who are permanently excluded, this is also the start of something new and positive.

I am clear that, where exclusion is the right decision to take and someone is excluded from a school, they must be excluded from a school and not from education itself. That especially matters because excluded children include some of society's most vulnerable and disadvantaged, with a third classed as children in need—that is, children known to social services.

Overall, when children from ethnic minorities are compared with white British children, there is no substantial difference in exclusion rates. The review found that children from some groups, such as black Caribbean children, are more likely to be excluded than white British children, while children from some other groups, such as Indian children, are less likely to be excluded.

The Government's response to Timpson is based on four key commitments. First, we will always support headteachers to maintain a safe and orderly environment for pupils and staff. We will support schools to give pupils at risk of exclusion the best chance to succeed. We will make when and how it is appropriate for headteachers to remove children from their school much clearer and at the same time we will ensure sufficient oversight when they are. Finally, we will do more to support schools and alternative providers so that excluded pupils continue to receive a high-quality education.

To deliver that, the Government are today committing to the following actions. First, we will make schools accountable for the outcomes of permanently excluded

children. We know that is complex and needs to be done in a way that is fair to schools and pupils, so we will work with education leaders over the summer to design a consultation to be launched in the autumn on how to deliver that in practice. As part of that consultation, we will also look at the implications of any changes to how alternative provision is commissioned and funded and at how we can mitigate the potential unintended consequences that Edward Timpson identified, including how to tackle the practice of so-called off-rolling. We will establish a practice programme to drive better partnership working between local authorities, schools, alternative provision and other partners, building on the excellent practice that Edward identified in his review. We will work with sector experts, led by the Department's lead adviser on behaviour, Tom Bennett, to rewrite our guidance, including on exclusions, behaviour and discipline in schools, by summer next year.

We call on local authorities, governing bodies, academy trusts and local forums of schools to establish a shared understanding of the characteristics of children who leave schools by exclusion or otherwise. Our expectation is that that information will be used to inform improvements in practice and reduce disparities in the likelihood of exclusion between different groups of pupils.

We will work with Ofsted to define—that will give greater clarity for school leaders—and tackle the practice of off-rolling, where children are removed from school rolls without following formal exclusion procedures. That is often in ways that are in the interests of the school rather than the pupil. We believe the practice is relatively rare, but we are clear that, where it happens, it is unacceptable.

Finally, we will set out our plans for alternative provision this autumn, including more on how we will support alternative providers to attract and develop high-quality staff through a new alternative provision workforce programme and on how we will help commissioners and providers to identify and recognise good practice.

Before concluding, I want to address the issue of violent crime, in particular knife crime, which has tragically taken the lives of far too many of our young people. The issues surrounding serious violence, antisocial behaviour and absence and exclusion from school are complex, which is why we are working with the education and care sectors, the Home Office and other Departments as part of a comprehensive, multi-agency response. While exclusion is a marker for increased risk of being a victim or perpetrator of crime, we must be careful not to draw a simple causal link between exclusions and knife crime. There is no clear evidence to support that. I am clear, though, that engagement with and success in education are a protective factor for children. The measures outlined in our response to Timpson will play a key role in ensuring that every young person is safe and free to fulfil their potential away from violent crime.

I thank all colleagues on both sides of the House who have taken a close interest in this area. I mention in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and the other members of his Select Committee. I thank them for their work on this important issue, in particular their inquiry into alternative provision, which has helped to shape Government thinking. Most of all, I thank Edward Timpson and all those he worked with during the review. In taking forward our

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response, we, like him, will take a consultative and collaborative approach to learn from those who carry out such valuable and often challenging work in teaching, supporting and caring for excluded children and those at risk of exclusion. I commend this statement to the House.

5.34 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I also thank Edward Timpson and everyone who contributed to the report.

No headteacher or school leader wants to exclude pupils, and this should be a power used as a last resort. As the report highlights, it is often the most vulnerable children who are excluded, and we must ensure that the right support is there. For some time I have urged the Secretary of State to match Labour's proposals and ensure that there is proper responsibility for pupils who leave school rolls, and I am glad he has said he will accept that, along with all the review's other recommendations.

I know there will be further consultation, but does the Secretary of State have a proposed approach to how and, critically, when schools will be accountable for the outcomes of excluded pupils? It took well over a year and several delays before today's publication. Further consultation, however necessary it may be, cannot become an excuse for more foot dragging, so when will the consultation conclude and implementation begin?

I am also concerned that the report is limited only to permanently excluded children. Is there accountability for pupils who leave school rolls outside formal permanent exclusion? If not, surely there is a risk not only that this measure will fail to tackle off-rolling, but that it will make the perverse incentives that lead to it even worse, not better. I welcome the Secretary of State's statement that the practice is unacceptable, unlawful and will be subject to a promised crackdown, but can he tell us how that will be achieved? What sanctions will be available to deter or prevent off-rolling?

The Secretary of State refers to Ofsted, but multi-academy trusts are not inspected, many schools go a decade with no inspection and Ofsted has suffered a 52% real-terms cut to its budget. Can it really tackle off-rolling under those constraints? His commitment to extend support for alternative provision is welcome, but will any additional funding be provided? What concrete measures will we see? The latest wave of free schools included just two that specialise in alternative provision, so how can he address the lack of services in some areas without allowing other schools to be built? Nor did he mention unregistered and unregulated alternative providers. Does he plan to take any further steps to enforce standards?

Let me ask the Secretary of State the obvious question that this review poses but fails to answer. Schools and all the other services that support the most vulnerable children are facing the worst cuts in a generation. The Secretary of State and the review dance around the impact of those cuts, but it is no good holding schools to account for obligations they do not have the resources to meet. Does he not accept that pupils are at greater risk of exclusion when support staff have been lost as a

result of funding cuts? How can we implement early intervention when the very services that provide it are being stripped away? What guarantee can he give that the next spending review will give those schools and services the funding they need and deserve?

The aims of this review are shared on both sides of the House, as the Secretary of State mentions. I welcome the steps that have been taken, including the adoption of some of Labour's proposals, but this cannot fall on schools alone. He mentions that a third of excluded pupils are known to children's social services, so how can we consider this issue without considering the massive cuts? He talks about knife crime, yet safer schools officers and youth workers are being withdrawn as funding for them is squeezed, too.

Too often, our schools have been left to pick up the pieces as services—from mental health provision to social care, from the police to youth services—have been dramatically scaled back, while austerity has hit hardest those least able to cope. This report found that excluded children were more likely to be those already disadvantaged by class, income, and special educational needs and disability, with certain ethnic minority groups at even higher risk. As the Government's own Social Mobility Commission found last week, in the past few years half a million more children have been growing up in poverty, social mobility has been "stagnant" and inequality has been "deeply entrenched". The Prime Minister promised that austerity was over. A generation of children cannot afford to keep waiting for that promise to be met.

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I agree with her, of course, that we need the education system to be resourced to have good outcomes for every child, with every child being able to live up to their full ability. I also agree with her about the links between different public agencies and, indeed, the whole of our society in helping to support some of these children.

The hon. Lady asks about improving and funding alternative provision. The high needs budget has risen significantly in the past few years. The proportion of that which has gone to AP has stayed broadly the same. As she will know, the cost-per-place in AP is considerably higher than it is in mainstream. The quality of AP is also typically higher. We know from Ofsted reports that we have a percentage in the mid-80s for the number of AP settings being rated as good or outstanding.

I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the amazing people who run some of these AP settings and the staff who work in them. The key to continued improvement in AP is getting more high-quality people to want to work there, which is a theme we will have to come back to again and again.

The hon. Lady asks whether we have a proposed approach on accountability. She will not be surprised to hear that we have talked about a number of potential approaches. Obviously, I think that some have more potential than others, but I am also conscious that there is a big risk of unintended consequences when we change anything to do with the system in education—she will have seen that. We need to get this right, which is why I have committed to working closely with the sector to make sure we co-design the system.

The hon. Lady also asks about off-rolling and whether schools would be held to account for off-rolled pupils. Off-rolling is not legal. It should not be happening, and we need to make sure it does not happen. Some people say that there are shades of grey and it is not always clear what is allowable and what is not, so we will tighten up the guidance to make sure that there is far less room for interpretation and it is clear when it is allowable for a child to be moved out of school and when it is not. Through Ofsted, and the new framework, a spotlight will be shone on cases where it is believed that off-rolling may be taking place.

The hon. Lady talks about the gap between Ofsted inspections. Of course a number of different triggers can lead to an Ofsted inspection happening more quickly, and it is right that Ofsted has that range available to it.

I agree with the hon. Lady that every child deserves an excellent education that fosters ambition and helps them to make the very most of their potential, whether they are in mainstream or AP. If they move from one to the other, what happens at that moment might make the biggest single difference to the entire rest of their lives.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome this review and pay tribute to Ed Timpson and to the Department. It was good news that the Department is welcoming his recommendations, many of which we suggested in the Education Committee report that the Secretary of State highlighted. I urge him to speed up the timescales of implementation. Given that the review says that those who are excluded can be identified, what more is he doing on early intervention to prevent those exclusions from happening in the first place? Finally, there is clearly a gap in post-16 alternative provision. Our Select Committee report recommended that resources be allocated for proper post-16 AP provision or outreach and support to colleges. What does he plan to do on those things?

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend is right about the distinction between pre-16 and post-16 provision. It is also true that, at 16, many children make a change in their place of learning—to a college or a further education college. There are also other types of setting to continue education or training. He asks about early intervention and was absolutely right to do so. There are, of course, many different types and many different stages of earliness of early intervention. What we are doing on exclusions is only one layer in a multi-layered approach to behaviour in schools. That starts with the very earliest type of interventions, which is early language, literacy and reading. If a child can access the curriculum and engage from an early age, it is much less likely that behaviour problems will start in the first place.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I welcome many of the recommendations made in the review—all eminently sensible recommendations. Of course young people do have a right to be educated in an environment that is conducive to good learning. Teachers also have a right to be able to work without fear or abuse. There are situations where the classroom environment becomes challenging for young people, but that does not mean that the young person should be prevented from accessing an education that is appropriate to their needs.

In Scotland, we are very proud of the work that we have done, and early exclusions have dropped by 59% since 2007. In 2016, just five young people were permanently excluded from the register, but achieving this drop has needed a lot of intervention and the use of things such as time-out rooms, pupil support and links to local further education colleges. In England, by contrast, the exclusion rates are increasing, and it is right that this should be dealt with. The Secretary of State said that 85% of schools do not permanently exclude, but that means that 15% do.

Off-rolling is passing on problems, and it must stop. We do not remove pupils from rolls in Scotland. They will continue to receive an education while excluded, either at school or at another location. Does the Secretary of State agree that, before any exclusion takes place, there should be an agreed plan put in place on what the next steps are for the particular child?

The Secretary of State talks about carrying weapons. Research by Edinburgh University shows that young people excluded from school are much more likely to end up in the criminal justice system or to be drawn to carrying weapons. Schools play a key role in protecting children from exploitation, so does he agree that joined-up work with challenging pupils alongside the police and social workers can have much better long-term benefit for the children than excluding them from the classroom?

Finally, does the Secretary of State agree that pupils with additional support needs, including those on the autistic spectrum, often need proper learning plans put in place, including resources and funding, to properly support them and ensure that they can continue to access mainstream education?

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. Of course I agree entirely with what she says about the need for appropriate support for children on the autistic spectrum or, indeed, for children with other special needs.

I acknowledge that Scotland has a very different approach to exclusions. I believe that the approach that we have in England is the right one, but it is right also that we have such reviews to make sure that exclusions are being used fairly and justly and are not affecting particular groups disproportionately.

The hon. Lady mentions the carrying of weapons and the fact that being in school is a protection against that. She is absolutely right about that, but it would be wrong to think that the sole or primary cause of a child not being in school is being excluded. Persistent absence is at least as big a deal.

Finally, I do recognise that the number of exclusions has come down very significantly in Scotland. The hon. Lady mentions that they are lower now than they were 10 years ago, but it is also true that exclusions in England are lower now than they were 10 years ago.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Alternative provision often takes too long to access and is a last resort, when in many cases it can be a positive experience for pupils and their families much earlier on. What can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State do to ensure swifter access to—and the removal of stigma from—alternative provision?

Damian Hinds: As my hon. Friend says, there is some fantastic alternative provision, some of which I have had the opportunity to see. The requirement to find a

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place in alternative provision applies from day six, but the guidance is clear that this should be done sooner where possible, and from day one for children in the care system.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I strongly welcome the publication of this review today, even though it is slightly overdue. I can see where Edward Timpson has held firm with the Government, and perhaps some other areas that the Government have asked him to water down slightly.

Damian Hinds indicated dissent.

Lucy Powell: Okay, the Secretary of State suggests not. Let me put it a different way then. One area that I feel could be strengthened is around the safety net and the powers of local authorities to require schools to keep children on their roll. The new guidance on managed moves and the local authority's powers to convene local forums are welcome, but that will not be sufficient where schools want to opt out of in-year fair access protocols in their area.

Damian Hinds: I am very clear that the ultimate decision to expel a child—a decision that is always taken with a very heavy heart when it needs to happen, after many other options have been looked at—is for that headteacher and that school. However, we want schools to work co-operatively, and there are some great examples of that around the country, including at both maintained schools and academies. Of course, local authorities also play an important role in that regard.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Off-rolling is often just the start of a conveyor belt that leads to pupil referral units, which too often are county lines recruiting grounds and villain academies. What is the Secretary of State going to do to ensure the rehabilitation is not just lip service and that we enable all students to have a second chance?

Damian Hinds: I totally agree. Rehabilitation is the opportunity for a second chance. What happens in alternative provision is an exceptionally pivotal moment in a young person's life, which is why the quality of that provision is so important, as is attendance. As I have said, AP is of a very high quality in the great majority of cases.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome the publication of this report, but I am really worried by the number of families coming to me because of real problems with their children not getting special educational needs support in schools. The parents end up having to try to home school their children instead, without the crucial support that they need. There has been a 40% increase in the number of permanent exclusions in my area in just a small number of years, and I cannot see in the Secretary of State's statement the reassurance for those families that they will get that SEN support by this time next year. What will have changed in the next 12 months to bring the number of exclusions down?

Damian Hinds: The right hon. Lady raises two different issues that have some relationship to each other, but are not the same subject. She is absolutely right that we have to have the right support to provide a tailored and fully enabling education for all children; our 2014 reforms were possibly the most important for a generation in that regard. Education, health and care plans are an important step forward. More money is being spent on high needs than used to be, but she is absolutely right that we need to continue to strive to do better.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Headteachers across the Wells constituency have shared with me their concerns that although our local PRUs are excellent, they are increasingly being funded by contributions from the local schools to plug gaps left by reductions in the county council's budget. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will be speaking to the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that vital units such as PRUs are funded properly across all interested agencies?

Damian Hinds: As I said earlier, the cost per place at an alternative provision setting is considerably higher than at a mainstream setting. That cost comes out of high-needs budgets, on which there have been considerable strains—from alternative provision, and in a bigger way from special schools and SEN provision. That is one reason why we were able to find an additional £250 million over two years to help ease some of the strains on local authority budgets.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I was the Minister for behaviour and exclusions when the statistics show that the figures started falling after 2007, and continued to fall. I am afraid that those figures came down because we actively pursued a policy—from the centre of government—to reduce exclusions through behaviour partnerships and of every child mattering. It needs leadership from Ministers to do something about this issue. Unless the Secretary of State really gets a grip on the situation, the figures will continue to rise, as they have done for the past few years, so will he commit to making this issue a central priority, and direct schools to be more responsible and work in partnership to reduce unnecessary exclusions?

Damian Hinds: We do want to reduce unnecessary exclusions. I noticed what the hon. Gentleman managed to do there; he presided over this responsibility at a time when the number of exclusions were higher than they are today, and he has used that to say that the number of exclusions were falling during that time. In the positive spirit in which he meant his question, yes, of course I agree that addressing the situation requires a concerted effort at all levels and in all parts of the system, with the Government, schools and, crucially, groups of schools working together locally.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Staff at PRUs do a vital job under often extremely difficult circumstances. I do not know about other constituencies, but the PRU in Stafford has for many years been housed in a completely inadequate building that is located in totally the wrong place. What can we do to ensure that staff and students at PRUs have a place that is appropriate, and that will hopefully enable students to go back to their mainstream schools as soon as possible and not be diverted?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right to identify that it is people who make the difference. People make the difference in the whole education system, but particularly in this part of it. Leaders and individual teachers can inspire young people and turn their lives around. It is also important that there is the right environment. Some 42 alternative provision free schools are open, and there are a further 12 in the pipeline as part of our ongoing large commitment of capital to increase the number of overall places in the education system, and of course for condition funding.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I was a bit surprised to find out that the review was published on the same day as the Government response, because we have been waiting for the review for some time and it is my understanding that it is not normal practice for the Government response to be published on the same day. But it is nice to have the Government response because it seems as though they are now actually going to do something. The problem is that we urgently need to do something about off-rolling. Ministers have previously come to the Select Committee on Education and said that off-rolling is illegal, and the Secretary of State has reiterated that this afternoon. But it is still happening and Ofsted is still giving “good” judgments to schools that are off-rolling pupils. Off-rolling is bad and it is happening all too often—rarely by comparison to the whole cohort of children, but there are still tens of thousands of youngsters around the country who have been off-rolled. It needs to stop. The consequences are bad for the children themselves, who all too often get no education whatever, but the consequences for the communities that they live in could also be very serious, as we know that excluded and off-rolled children become embroiled in the criminal justice system.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is right. Off-rolling is wrong and should not be happening. There are different categories within off-rolling, and Ofsted will be looking at this issue in its new framework. There are two ways to look at the question of our response coming out on the same day as the report: a positive way and a negative way. I prefer to see it as a same-day service that demonstrates urgency.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s approach to the Timpson review and the clear action that he set out in respect of off-rolling, which is when children are pushed out of education. Will he also give some attention to the situation that occurs when the relationship breaks down between the school on the one hand and the parents and pupil on the other hand, which often leads to parents taking their children out of formal schooling, so they then often receive no education at all?

Damian Hinds: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The relationship between families and schools is absolutely at the heart of education. Of course we want those relationships to be as strong as they can and for people on both sides to keep on working at them for the good of the child.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): One of the things in the report that I found particularly concerning was the talk of the children at

multiple risk—at risk not just because they have special educational needs and disability but because they have SEND, they are from an ethnic minority background, and they are from a disadvantaged background. I fear that where we talk about the problem of exclusion, there could be a perverse incentive for schools to increase off-rolling and, even worse, to refuse to admit children with these characteristics in the first place. What powers can the Government give to local authorities to compel schools to accept children with these characteristics and to readmit children who have been off-rolled?

Damian Hinds: Of course, schools must have fair admissions policies, and that is absolutely right. It is also right that we at the Department for Education and local authorities, working together, need to make sure that the support is there for schools to be able to do their very best for the children concerned. The hon. Lady has my continued commitment to that.

Ann Coffey (Stockport) (Change UK): Edward Timpson’s report identifies that moving from primary to secondary school can be a difficult time for children, leading to a rise in exclusions during the transition period. Stockport has a programme that identifies children in primary school who need extra support at that time. Without this support, which includes working with families, schools and mentors, vulnerable children are likely to fail or be excluded. The lack of funding limits the number of children who can be helped. What extra funding will local authorities receive from the new practice improvement fund to help with the primary-to-secondary transition?

Damian Hinds: I do not know the specific answer on the practice improvement fund. There are parts of the country where we are looking at this if it is a long-standing issue. The primary-to-secondary-phase transition manifests itself in a number of different ways. It can be a very daunting prospect for a child moving sometimes from quite a small, manageable school where they know most people to the much bigger and, in some senses, scarier environment of secondary school. Summer learning loss is another feature of this. I will take care to look at the example in Stockport that the hon. Lady mentions.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Last year, an academy in my constituency temporarily excluded nearly a quarter of its pupils. That is over a third of all exclusions across Barnsley. The Minister said that there is no right level of exclusions, but surely he will agree that these figures are far too high. Can I push him again on what the Government are proposing to do to tackle excessive exclusions in our schools?

Damian Hinds: Most of my statement was a response to the hon. Lady’s question, or at least indirectly. There is no right level of exclusions to pursue, but obviously we would all like exclusions to be lower, because that means more children being in school in a stable education and not having to move elsewhere in the system. I do not know if she was trying to make a specific point in mentioning academies, but overall academies and local authority maintained schools have broadly the same rates.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I broadly welcome this report. The Secretary of State will be aware of the analysis by the Education Policy Institute that shows that just 6% of schools account for almost a quarter of unexplained pupil exits. That equates to a whole class of 30 pupils over the course of their schooling in secondary school leaving with no explanation. That is wholly unacceptable. The EPI is now seeking to establish which academy chains and local authorities have particularly high rates. Given that it is unlawful, what will be the consequences for the academy chains and local authorities that are responsible for this outrageous practice?

Damian Hinds: With respect, the right hon. Gentleman has made something of a leap. It is correct that off-rolling is not legal, and through the Ofsted framework we will make sure that a light is shone on that, but that does not mean that every child in an analysis of unexplained exits has been off-rolled. There are a number of different reasons why children might be leaving school—emigration, for example—and it is important not to conflate them all.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister might be aware that in the 10 years that I was the Education Committee Chair, Edward Timpson was one of the most thoughtful and hard-working members of that Committee, so I expected a good report, and this has some very good elements. May I take the Minister on to the central call for early intervention? The fact is—I hope he will agree with this—that early intervention depends on good data on what is going on in schools: how much bullying there is, how much absence, how many attacks on teachers and so on. The data is there; the problem is who acts on it. Much-weakened local authorities find that hard because they do not have the resources to act quickly or effectively. Ofsted has fewer resources than it had before to take action. That means that the central Department that he heads up has more and more power. If a school is badly managed, we get these problems, so the necessity to get it back on track with good management must be our responsibility.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is right about the usefulness of data, but it is also true to say that data has its limits. School management teams use other ways that are at least as important to really understand what is going on in a school. However, he is right to talk about the quality of leadership and management because, as with so much else in education, that is fundamental. He asked about early intervention. I mentioned early years literacy, but also, in a different sense of early intervention, we have recently made some announcements about a behaviour support network backed by £10 million of funding to make sure that good practice on behaviour policy and behaviour management within the school system—there is some fantastic practice out there—can get propagated throughout the system.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): When these documents—the Timpson review and the Government's response—were published today, large-print copies were not produced for me. It is unacceptable that I still do not have a large-print copy of either document. Will the Secretary of State ensure and guarantee that I will get those large-print copies as soon as possible?

Turning to my question, I ask the Secretary of State again: does he believe that schools and other support services have the funding they actually need to make these early interventions the norm for some of our most vulnerable pupils?

Damian Hinds: On the hon. Lady's second point, I do recognise that funding is tight in schools—we have had discussions and debates about that in this House on a number of occasions—but there is also truly outstanding practice in our education system. We need to make sure that where outstanding practice exists, it can also be spread. On her first point, I am sorry—I did not know about the absence of a large-print version of the report and I will see to it that she is furnished with one.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I welcome this review by Timpson. It is very well considered and speaks home truths that the sector and many Members on both sides of the House have been trying to get this Government in front of and to pay attention to. I look forward to the implementation of the Government's response published today. We know from the report, as we knew before its publication, that 20% of all those excluded were under the category of "other". We also know that 80% of those excluded have special educational needs or are disabled learners. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State questions that. The figure is 44% on temporary exclusions and 46% on fixed, so cumulatively it is 80%—in fact, more than that. What will he be doing differently in following up the Government's response to ensure that this is not just a report on how to exclude well but on how to design a system that is inclusive for learners in mainstream schools with special educational needs and disability? Some 80% to 90% of tribunals have found in favour of parents who take local authorities to court because they have been let down by SEND support in mainstream education. It is cheaper to do more a lot earlier.

Damian Hinds: The position on children with special educational needs and exclusion is a very important subject. It is quite a complex picture. Alongside today's report, we have published some quite detailed analysis on the odds on different groups being excluded, when we control for other facts. As I say, it is quite a complex picture, and I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to have a look at it. However, he is absolutely right that the early support we can give to children with special educational needs, which often means the support that we give to schools and to teachers in schools, is incredibly valuable.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The report paints a powerful picture of many of the issues faced by those of us working in communities with children who are at risk of violence and of being violent, and in particular the all-too-familiar story that when a child is excluded from school that sometimes means they are forgotten, rather than it being a trigger for intervention. In Walthamstow, over the past year, we as a community have been looking at mentoring in our schools, to try to work with some of these young people. Will the Secretary of State meet me and some of the community groups involved in that work, to see what we can learn from it and help to ensure that every child has a bright future within education?

Damian Hinds: That sounds like a very interesting programme. Of course I would be happy to do so, and I look forward to it.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): This is all about leadership. We need to know who is responsible and accountable at a local level for the education of all the young people, so that no one gets left at the edges. Will the Secretary of State look at ensuring that there is not only co-ordination but responsibility in behaviour partnerships or the local authority, so that intervention takes place, to tackle this issue once and for all?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman is right—I am not surprised; he is often right about these things—about the importance of collaboration and co-operative working. There are great examples around the country of that happening between different types of school. It is not usually about the formal management structure; it is about everybody seeing the shared interest and working together, and that is what we encourage people to do.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Youth work offers young people the opportunity to access education in an informal environment. We know that good youth work and strong youth workers can support young people and their families to engage with schools and teachers, in order to prevent exclusions, but we have lost 3,500 youth workers since 2010, and more than 800 youth centres have closed—the system is creaking. What commitment can the Secretary of State make to look at working with the youth work sector in order to support the education sector and some of the most vulnerable young people in our communities?

Damian Hinds: I agree with the hon. Lady about the importance of different agencies—different parts of the public, private and voluntary sectors—working together on this, and that includes youth work. Some very good programmes are run in different parts of the country, and generally speaking people find that partnership working pays off.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I share concerns raised by Members about exclusions and illegal off-rolling, but schools make use of other tools and practices to remove children—particularly SEN children—from classes, such as isolation booths. Those booths are barbaric, leaving children in what is essentially solitary confinement for the school day. I have even heard stories of children being placed in these booths due to poverty-related incidents, such as wearing the wrong shoes for the day. That is quite simply unacceptable. What is the Secretary of State doing to address the serious issue of isolation booths?

Damian Hinds: It is right that schools set their behaviour policies, but of course those have to be reasonable, and that is what we expect throughout the system. We have guidance on these things, and as part of the response to this report I have committed to update the guidance on a range of matters relating to exclusions and behaviour, including that one. That is not to say that the use of isolation as a punishment and a deterrent is wrong in all cases. When people use that term, it does not mean the same thing in all schools, and what the hon. Gentleman describes is not necessarily what we find in other places.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I think all Members across the House recognise that many of these excluded young people are the most vulnerable, but we should also recognise that a lot of them are deeply traumatised. Will he look into the excellent work of the Trauma Recovery Centre in Bath, engage with the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences and look at whether all schools in England can become trauma informed?

Damian Hinds: Yes. The recognition of childhood trauma is incredibly important. There is a very heavy overlap between children in need who are known to social services and those exposed to childhood trauma. We know that that group is more likely to be excluded, so I welcome what the hon. Lady says and the focus that her group brings to the issue.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): In order to learn lessons, will the Secretary of State publish a list of the 47 schools with in excess of 10 expulsions a year? Given the fact that off-rolling is a huge issue, will he also publish the list of 300 schools with “particularly high levels” of pupil movement? What action are the Government taking to deal with the increasing issue of off-rolling or children who are missing from the system? Many Members have raised concerns. What extra resources are available to back up these recommendations?

Finally, how will he continue to update the House? It needs to be regularly. We have waited since before Christmas for the Timpson review, and we cannot have delays like that again for updates.

Damian Hinds: I will be happy to continue to update the hon. Lady. We have Education questions regularly, and there are other opportunities to be kept updated. She asked about the publication of lists. This report was a major piece of work to find out the reality of practice and how it varies in different places for different groups of children. It is a very valuable piece of work for that reason.

On the hon. Lady’s point about the small number of schools with a large number of exclusions, it is necessary to remember that that might be in one year, and in other years the school is not in that position. Sometimes it is because a school has a particularly troubled set of circumstances—a new headteacher comes in, or there is a change, and various measures have to be taken. As I say, I think all of us would like to see the number of exclusions be lower rather than higher, but that is not to say that there is never a role for exclusion.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): This afternoon, the Secretary of State has admitted that he knows school funding is tight and that the earlier we intervene with children who have special educational needs, the better. I agree with him. I am fed up of schools in my constituency telling me about the impact of real-terms cuts to their budgets, which tend to hit specialist services the most. Will the Secretary of State finally commit to reverse those real-terms funding cuts and stick to his word, to ensure that children with special educational needs get the support they need at an early stage?

Damian Hinds: I do say, as I said earlier, that funding is tight in schools, and managing school budgets can be challenging. It is also true that we are holding real-terms

[Damian Hinds]

per pupil funding constant at the macro level. It is also true that, internationally, we have relatively high state spending at primary and secondary level. It is also true that the high-needs budget has risen from £5 billion to more than £6 billion. All those things are true simultaneously. There has been more money going in, but it is very difficult. There have been specific cost pressures for schools. I recognise that, and the hon. Lady has my continued commitment to ensure that we get the right level of resourcing that we need for an excellent education for everyone.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is reported that Gloucestershire has the highest level of exclusions in the south-west. The one thing that is missing from this very good report is any quantitative evidence. It would be useful to know that the Secretary of State is prepared to look at the differences between not only schools but local authority areas, to ensure that we bear down on areas that do not seem to have an appropriate strategy.

Damian Hinds: The hon. Gentleman has my commitment on that. We have looked, and Edward has looked in his analysis, at not only the differences between schools within an area but the differences between local authority areas, at different levels of geography and in different segmentations and typologies.

Banking (Consumer and Small Business Protection)

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

6.19 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to enable consumers to transfer mortgages between providers; to prohibit the sale of mortgage debt to unregulated entities and the foreclosure of certain loans; to establish financial services tribunals; and for connected purposes.

This Bill makes provision for a new covenant to deliver a fairer deal for borrowers. It seeks first to free the mortgage prisoners, secondly to protect small business borrowers, and thirdly to make provision for a new financial services tribunal.

First, who are the mortgage prisoners? They are people who are trapped by changes in mortgage regulation. They are trapped in expensive mortgages and unable to remortgage to get a better deal. The rules say that they cannot afford payments on a mortgage at, say, 2% so they are forced to continue with a mortgage paying 5% or more. It is a crazy situation. It is estimated that there are up to 200,000 mortgage prisoners in the UK today. Every one of these 200,000 families has a story of how they have struggled to get by, struggled to meet expensive payments to keep a roof over their heads.

One of those is Charlotte's family. Charlotte is 39 years old. She and her husband live in the west midlands. They took out a Northern Rock mortgage in 2007. In 2010 she had twins who suffer from serious disabilities: both are wheelchair bound. Charlotte and her husband have never missed a single mortgage payment, but they cannot remortgage because of the regulators' affordability test. She says:

"How can we not afford to pay less?"

Why does that matter to Charlotte and her family? She says that with a new mortgage they could pay so much less, and afford more therapies for their sick children, rather than having to fundraise.

Charlotte is far from alone. Mr and Mrs Adams live in Bournemouth in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns). They took out a Northern Rock mortgage in 2007. Now it is owned by TSB's Whistletree fund, after the Treasury sold their mortgage off, so they are trapped on a rate of 5%. Incredibly, TSB will not let them switch as they say they are not TSB customers—something I hope TSB will reconsider. They cannot go elsewhere because they fail the regulators' affordability test to pay lower payments on their mortgage, even though they have made all their mortgage payments and their loan to value is just 62%. This has put terrible pressure on the family and the stress has caused them to be ill.

Mortgage prisoners live in fear of rates rising. Jayne, 50, took out a Northern Rock mortgage in 2007. She was on a five-year tracker mortgage 0.5% above base rate. Her mortgage has since been sold to Cerberus by the Treasury. Last weekend, an investigation in *The Mail on Sunday* by William Turvill described Cerberus as a "hound from hell" vulture fund. Jayne is now paying nearly 5% interest on a variable rate and worries about how she might afford the payments if rates go up. She

cannot go elsewhere because she is self-employed. Her income fluctuates, meaning that she fails the “affordability” to be able to get a new mortgage with lower payments, even though she has made all her mortgage payments and the loan to value is just 50%. Her mortgage is costing some £4,000 more a year than it would if she was not a mortgage prisoner.

These cases highlight the plight of Britain’s mortgage prisoners. The Government should be lending a helping hand, not a tin ear. The Treasury should not be selling mortgages off to vulture funds like Cerberus without protection. The regulators should be doing their bit to help free the mortgage prisoners, too. There has been some change. The Financial Conduct Authority launched a consultation in March. It proposes changing the affordability test for consumers who are up to date with their payments. That sounds good, but there is a big shortcoming. The proposals outlined give lenders the option, they do not introduce the obligation.

It is also welcome that in July last year, UK Finance—the banks’ trade association—launched a voluntary agreement, in which lenders committed to support existing mortgage prisoners to switch to an alternative product at their present lender. But that does not help people switch from vulture funds, and it does not help Mr and Mrs Adams escape from TSB’s Whistletree fund, because TSB claims that they are not its customers, even though Whistletree’s own website describes it as a

“trading name of TSB Bank plc”.

I hope that TSB will reconsider.

How does this Bill seek to set free the mortgage prisoners? These mortgages were taken out many years ago—2007 and before, so well before the post-crash affordability rules and other regulatory changes came in. Yet these borrowers have proved their ability to pay for over a decade by making their mortgage payments. Why have a computer-driven affordability test that ignores the reality of the real world? We have to move past “computer says no” to “reality says yes”. These borrowers should be treated as grandfathered as regards the later regulatory rules that came in. Banks should be obliged by the FCA to take people on and treat them as grandfathered, whether they are existing customers or not, and the new mortgages should be permitted without any regulatory penalty for the bank they move to.

The Treasury needs to take responsibility, too. The Treasury has been selling Northern Rock’s loan book to funds like Cerberus. When selling these books, they should make sure that there are protections so that borrowers do not lose out. It is wrong for the Treasury to have allowed borrowers to be placed in a worse position than would otherwise have been the case.

There needs to be a fairer deal for business borrowers as well. Business loans above £25,000 are unregulated. Time and again, we have seen the results of this—RBS’s Global Restructuring Group unit, Lloyds’ Business Support Unit and the practices of funds like Cerberus. Small

businesses are the lifeblood and job creators of our economy. We need to see them treated fairly, so that they can focus on what they do best—creating jobs and making our country more successful.

The all-party parliamentary group for fair business banking and finance, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), has campaigned tirelessly to secure a fairer deal for business borrowers. And it is badly needed because one would think that, when small businesses are making their loan payments, they must be untouchable. Yet it is all too easy to seize on a technical loan condition breach to pull the plug and foreclose. Perfectly viable, successful businesses are wrongly ended in this way. Not only are jobs lost, but the business owners all too often lose their homes and go personally bankrupt. It means that we lose entrepreneurs. Every time a small business closes, part of our economy dies.

How does this Bill protect small business borrowers? First, it would ban the practice of seizing on loan conditions. The rule should be that if a small business is paying, the lender cannot pull the plug, but it is not just about foreclosure on a technicality. There should be a greater rebalancing for small businesses to take on big banks that are trying to take advantage of them. That is why there needs to be a new financial services tribunal. Most small business borrowers cannot go to the Financial Ombudsman Service. They are too small to be able to afford expensive court battles. A new financial services tribunal would fill the gap. It is welcome that the ombudsman’s remit has been extended, yet this is not a solution as redress is limited. Moreover, unregulated entities like Cerberus are not covered. That is why we need a financial services tribunal to protect small business borrowers.

Capitalism is vital to the success of our economy and a cornerstone of our way of life. Yet as Conservatives we know that capitalism must be tempered by responsibility and fairness. We want people to work hard and to be able to enjoy success, yet we will not tolerate people being taken advantage of. That is the policy of this Bill—a Bill that seeks to set free the mortgage prisoners, to protect small business borrowers who are meeting their loan payments from foreclosure, and to make provision for a new financial services tribunal to ensure greater protection for small business. This is a Bill that seeks to forge a new covenant to deliver greater fairness for borrowers.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Charlie Elphicke, Kevin Hollinrake, Holly Lynch, Stewart Hosie, Nicky Morgan, John Mann, David Simpson, Mr Steve Baker, Wes Streeting, Mr Simon Clarke, John Spellar and Mr Paul Sweeney present the Bill.

Charlie Elphicke accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 387).

Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill

Second Reading

6.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill delivers an important part of the work that the Government are doing to protect animals, both in the wild and in captivity, and to ensure that we as a country maintain our world leadership on safeguarding and respecting animals. This important Bill seeks to bring to an end outdated practices that have no place in modern society and delivers a long held Government commitment. It addresses the specific concerns of the public and Parliament about the use of wild animals in travelling circuses and seeks to bring that activity to an end. That requires primary legislation, for reasons that I will explain in a moment.

The Government published the draft Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny in April 2013. I pay tribute to Members who have taken the Bill forward as private Members' Bills. First, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who is in his place, picked up the Bill at the end of the 2010 to 2015 Parliament. Then my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster) attempted to take the Bill forward during the last Parliament. Last, but by no means least, during this Session my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who is in her place, really sought to give the Bill wings. Sadly, those attempts were not successful, for reasons that I will not go into here, but I thank those Members for their efforts.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who, I am pleased to see, is also in his place. His Backbench Business debate back in June 2011 put this issue firmly on the Government's agenda and made it clear what Parliament was specifically concerned about.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Minister is setting out the history—the long time it has taken to get the Bill to this point. Although I very much welcome the fact that it is here, it is very overdue. Will he confirm that the Bill will come into force in January 2020? Will he also confirm that, if by some strange happenstance it gets delayed by Brexit or anything else—even if the Bill has not finished its progress through Parliament—the Government will not issue any more licences after January 2020?

David Rutley: We will do everything we can. We are completely committed to making sure that the legislation gets into place. The hon. Lady has been keen to see it through, and we will do that. We are absolutely committed to delivering on this legislation.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): This has been a pretty sorry story of delay, but I welcome the fact that the Bill is now here, given the lack of legislative business. Will the Minister say when the Government will bring forward legislation on increasing the penalties available to the courts for those guilty of animal cruelty? That is another issue that has been waiting a long time. It urgently needs to be resolved.

David Rutley: I completely agree. We are working hard to find the right vehicle to take that important legislation forward. I am just delighted that today we are taking forward action on wild animals and circuses.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I support this Bill, but will the Minister confirm that nothing in it should cause any animal affected by it to be put down?

David Rutley: I completely understand my right hon. Friend's concern. We have had conversations with circus owners, who certainly have no such intentions whatever—they regard these animals as part of their families. The issue is that the practice is outdated and society has moved on; it is not appropriate for such performances and exhibitions to take place. As I will explain later, circus owners will still be able to own the animals and look after them, but they will have to seek licences and will be inspected.

Many Members on both sides of the House have spoken passionately about this issue. Time prevents me from naming them all, but we recognise the concerns and I am pleased that we are able to take action today. I am delighted that there is strong support across the Chamber today. I will, of course, talk about the important work that took place under the previous Labour Government. I am delighted at the degree of co-operation. Of course we understand that there will be challenges, but we are grateful for the co-operation, which will ensure a smooth passage for this legislation.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): We were promised that the Bill would come in after the Backbench Business debate secured by the hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). One of the reasons subsequently given by the Government for not introducing it was that the European Union would not allow us to—there is a stream of responses to my written parliamentary questions on the subject that told me that. However, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands, Scotland, Slovenia and Slovakia have all introduced a ban. Will the Minister put on the record that that line that we were given—that we could not introduce a ban because we were in the EU—was just not true?

David Rutley: I was not around at the time of whatever was said. I have been involved for eight months and we have been working closely together on a wide range of activities. We are trying to get this legislation through at pace. I pay tribute to the work that has gone on in Scotland since we declared that there would be a commitment to introducing this ban. The ban has been introduced there and we are pleased that there has been support for what we are doing today from the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) and the Scottish Government.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister was not around at the time and cannot be held responsible, but the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is absolutely right. France is another member of the European Union that has introduced a ban.

I welcome the Second Reading of this Bill in the House of Commons. It has taken some time, perhaps longer than it should have, but I am grateful that the

Government have brought it forward. I have two quick questions. Will the Minister give a commitment that the timetable for introduction will not slip beyond next January? Secondly, does he believe the Bill is tough enough on enforcement?

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for those questions and again acknowledge his work and tireless commitment on this issue. I remember him discussing the issue at length and in depth.

No, the timetable will not slip. Obviously, what was said when we made the commitment to bring the legislation into place was that there would be interim regulations involving licences. There was a sunset clause on those, and we will get the legislation in place so that there is no gap. There have been questions about that matter previously.

On enforcement, this Bill, as I will explain, is based primarily on ethics rather than welfare concerns. It does not have some of the enforcement powers that some people have talked about. However, it is important to note that other legislation is in place—not least the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and legislation from 1976—that will enable us to have those enforcement powers. This Bill complements that: the legislation works together to provide the enforcement mechanisms that my hon. Friend is seeking.

When we first announced in March 2012 that we would introduce a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses, the Government were clear that primary legislation would take time. As I have said, we introduced interim measures—welfare licensing regulations. Those regulations will expire in 2020 and the Government have announced that they will not be renewed. That is why this Bill is being introduced: so that we can deliver with confidence on that commitment.

It might help if I provide a bit of historical context, to put the timeframes into perspective.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): That will have to be long!

David Rutley: Given all the statutory instruments of recent months, I am used to this sort of barracking and harassment from the other side, but I take it in the intended spirit.

The subject matter itself has long been a source of debate: the issue was considered by a parliamentary Select Committee between 1921 and 1922, which resulted in the Performing Animals (Regulation) Act 1925. No Members in the House today were around at that time. As hon. Members may be aware, this Government replaced that Act when we introduced the Animal Welfare (Licensing and Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018. Since the 1925 Act was introduced, debates and motions in Parliament on animals in circuses have been commonplace.

As I said, it is important to recognise the work undertaken by the previous Labour Government. During the debates on the Animal Welfare Bill in 2006, the then Government agreed to look at the issue in order to bring forward a ban on the use of certain wild species in travelling circuses using the delegated powers provided in the Animal Welfare Act 2006, subject to there being sufficient scientific evidence to support it. To assess that evidence, the academic lawyer Mike Radford was appointed to chair a circus working group. His report, the Radford report, concluded that there were no welfare concerns

over and above animals kept in other captive environments. Therefore, any attempt to take forward a ban on welfare grounds under the Animal Welfare Act would fail the test of proportionality and primary legislation would be needed.

Following the report, a feasibility study was undertaken during 2008 to assess whether regulations were appropriate. The study concluded that a regulatory regime could be devised and implemented. The previous Government issued a public consultation in December 2009 on how best to protect wild animals in travelling circuses and about 95% of respondents supported a complete ban.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that the British Veterinary Association concluded:

“The welfare needs of non-domesticated, wild animals cannot be met within a travelling circus—in terms of housing or being able to express normal behaviour”?

Does he agree with the evidence brought forward by the BVA?

David Rutley: We have worked closely with the BVA and I am really pleased that it has welcomed the steps we have taken. I agree that it has put forward some compelling arguments and I am pleased it recognises we are able to deliver on them. Again, we are seeing collaborative working relationships across Parliament with the welfare groups to get the proposed legislation through. It has taken time—more time than any of us would have liked—but it is now moving forward.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister said that 95% of people responded to the previous Government’s consultation. What does that mean in numbers, so the House can have a good idea of how many people were actually consulted?

David Rutley: That is a fantastic question—a terrific question—which I know the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), with her encyclopaedic knowledge, will be answering in a little time. It will be worth waiting for. I know the hon. Gentleman asked me the question, but we will get that answer in just a little while. Joking aside, the important point was that 95% of respondents wanted the ban. That is the key point. Society has moved on and this is not appropriate activity.

In terms of the next milestone, I have already talked about the important Backbench Business that was put through unopposed by my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin, calling on the Government to introduce a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. In response, in March 2012, the Government announced they would pursue a ban, with licensing regulations introduced as a temporary measure. In April 2013, the Government published the draft Wild Animals in Circuses Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny, leading to subsequent attempts, by the hon. Members mentioned in my introduction, to introduce the Bill via the private Members’ Bill route.

There are now only 19 wild animals left in travelling circuses. That is a low number, but the BVA captured the importance of the Bill when it said that a ban is emblematic of how we should be treating animals in the modern world.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): There are two circuses, Circus Mondao and Peter Jolly's Circus, with the 19 animals. Is the Minister going to ensure the welfare of those animals is secured after they have been released from performing? They are not wild animals or domestic animals. They will need to be well looked after.

David Rutley: As defined in this Bill, they are wild animals, but I understand my hon. Friend's point. As I tried to make clear earlier, their welfare absolutely will be looked after. We have had assurances of that from the circuses themselves and we have legislation in place that will ensure that there are ongoing inspections to make sure that their welfare is looked after. I hope that reassures my hon. Friend. I recognise his interest as the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the important work the Committee has done on this issue and across a wide range of other activities on animal welfare. I am grateful to him for that.

Mark Pritchard: I thank the Minister for giving way; he is being very generous. A lot of people across the House have supported me over the years—the Greens, Labour, Liberal Democrats and so on. This is a tribute to them all. He mentions the Animal Welfare Bill under the previous Labour Government. I remember working with colleagues across the House on that. Is it not time for the Government, however grateful I am for the introduction of this Bill, to introduce a comprehensive animal welfare Bill of their own, which incorporates so many other private Members' Bills that have been discussed in this House over the past few years, rather than take a piecemeal approach? Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, for plugging my own private Members' Bills, but there are three I could name: the Protection of Common Birds Bill, the Sale of Primates as Pets (Prohibition) Bill and the Sale of Endangered Animals on the Internet Bill. Those are just three Bills from one lowly Conservative Back Bencher. Many other important animal welfare thoughts, ideas, policies and Bills have been introduced over the past few years. Will the Government seriously consider a comprehensive Bill to modernise animal welfare once and for all?

David Rutley: That is another important question. There is a strong rationale to do that. We are looking at other proposed legislation going forward. The environment Bill will be absolutely pivotal in the next Session, but as my hon. Friend knows we have other legislation we need to get through. We all know, including those on the Opposition Benches, that there is a lot of other proposed legislation that will take up time and make matters more complicated. However, he makes a good point and it is vital we seek ways to get other Bills in place, not least on animal sentience. We have already had a question about sentencing and increased sentences. I share the commitment to seeing that proposed legislation through. We just need to find the right vehicle to do that.

There are key arguments about necessity. It is not necessary to use wild animals to operate a circus or to enjoy the circus experience. The public can still, as the vast majority already do, attend travelling circuses that do not use wild animal acts. They can also readily see wild animals in zoos and safari parks. We need to consider the intrinsic value of wild animals. Modern society recognises the intrinsic value of these animals.

This concerns the respect of animals and their natural behaviour. Wild animals in a circus are trained for our entertainment and amusement. That sends the wrong message to audiences about the intrinsic value of those animals. We should appreciate wild animals behaving naturally, not in a comic or superficial setting. We need to look at the educational conservation benefits. The practice of using wild animals in circus performances, unlike in zoos, does nothing to further our understanding or the conservation of wild animals. There is no greater benefit to humans or animals that justifies the use of wild animals in circuses. In short, it is an outdated practice that is no longer necessary to operate a circus or to enjoy the circus experience, and it is demeaning to the wild animals involved.

In 1990, 29 years ago, there were over 250 wild animals across some 20 circuses, including tigers, lions, elephants and bears. By the time of the 2009 DEFRA consultation, it was estimated that there were only four circuses in the UK using some 47 wild animals. Today, there are only 19 wild animals left and only two travelling circuses. Attitudes and audience appetites have changed, but if we fail to bring in a ban by the time our licensing regulations expire in January there is a risk that we could see more travelling circuses using wild animals such as lions and tigers again. It is crucial that we do not let that happen.

Let me turn to the Bill itself. Clause 1, the main clause, will make it an offence for a circus operator to use a wild animal in a travelling circus in England. The offence applies only to operators of travelling circuses in the circus environment; our view is that most people are employees or hired acts who are firmly in the control of the operator, so it should be the operator who carries responsibility for any illegal use of a wild animal.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister look again at the need to define “travelling circus” in the Bill? A concern exists that without such a definition, the law will be unclear on circuses that travel without actually showing the animals. Many animal welfare organisations think that it would be much clearer if the Bill included a definition of “travelling circus”.

David Rutley: I understand that some residual concerns have been raised by welfare groups, but I assure the hon. Lady that the definition set out will be adequate. In fact, the Scottish Government arrived at a very similar definition.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Minister says that he believes that the definition is adequate, but surely he will concede that such matters can be explored and tested in Committee. If it can be demonstrated that the definition is not as clear as it ought to be, will the Government be open to amending the Bill before Third Reading?

David Rutley: Of course, in Committee, we will have the chance to review these things in more detail. There has been ongoing discussion with Opposition Front Benchers about the Committee process.

Clause 1(2) defines “use” as either performance or exhibition. It should cover circumstances in which wild animals are put on display at the circus, usually just

adjacent to the big top, as well as performances in the ring. The penalty for a circus operator who is found guilty of using a wild animal in a travelling circus is an unlimited fine; the Animal Welfare Act 2006 also provides powers to seize animals where there are grounds to do so.

Subsection (4) provides for corporate liability where the circus operator is a corporate entity. Subsection (5) sets out definitions of terms used throughout clause 1, including “wild animal”—a term that is well understood and has already been defined in other legislation such as the Zoo Licensing Act 1981 and the Welfare of Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (England) Regulations 2012. We have largely replicated that approach in the Bill:

“‘wild animal’ means an animal of a kind which is not commonly domesticated in Great Britain”.

To meet that definition, an animal does not have to have been born in the wild. Most of the wild animals currently in English circuses have been bred in captivity, usually from several generations of circus animals, but that does not make them domesticated. Domestication is a process that happens over many generations—hundreds of years, if not thousands.

To return to a question asked by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), clause 1 does not define “travelling circus”. The term is left to take its common meaning, which we believe the courts will have no trouble in interpreting. Indeed, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee’s July 2013 report on the draft Bill agreed that we did not need to include a definition of the term; nor was a circus itself defined by the Scottish Parliament in the Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (Scotland) Act 2018. Defining a circus in a specific way might be unhelpful, because it could provide parameters for an operator to seek to evade the ban.

The common meaning of “circus” is

“a company of performers who put on shows with diverse entertainments, often of a daring or exciting nature, that may include, for example, acts such as...acrobats, trapeze acts...tightrope walkers, jugglers, unicyclists”.

The role of wild animals in a circus, when they are used, is to provide an entertaining spectacle for our amusement, often as a way to demonstrate the skill or dominance of the trainer. That is outdated, and it is what we are legislating against.

Clause 2 relates to inspections, for which powers are set out in the schedule. Inspectors will be appointed by the Secretary of State, although we envisage that the numbers required will be small. We already have a small panel of inspectors to enforce the interim wild animals in circuses licensing regime, all of whom are drawn from the Department’s list of zoo licensing veterinary inspectors and are highly experienced in the handling and treatment of wild animals in captivity. Inspectors will be appointed on a case-by-case basis by the Animal and Plant Health Agency to investigate evidence of any offence.

Clause 3 will make a minor consequential amendment to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976, which requires persons who wish to keep dangerous wild animals to be licensed. Those who keep dangerous wild animals in a circus are currently exempted from that requirement, but once the new ban comes into force, there should no longer be any vertebrate dangerous wild animals in

travelling circuses. We have therefore taken a belt-and-braces approach to make it clear that using dangerous wild vertebrate animals in a travelling circus is not allowed.

The Scottish Government, who have already introduced a ban on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses in Scotland, have asked us to extend to Scotland our amendment to the 1976 Act, and we are pleased to enable that request. Once again, we are grateful for the Scottish Government’s work on this and many other aspects of animal welfare. The Welsh Government are considering their own ban; we have also discussed the matter with the Northern Ireland Government, who are not in a position to consider a ban at this point.

Clause 4 provides for the Bill to come into force on 20 January 2020, the day after the interim circus licensing regulations expire. I hope that I have already reassured hon. Members that it will come into effect in a timely way.

It is worth clarifying what the Bill will not do. First, I make it absolutely clear that we are not proposing to ban circuses, only their use of wild animals. Plenty of travelling circuses do not use wild animals, or indeed any animals, in their acts; the Bill will have no impact on them. Nor will it stop circus operators owning wild animals. If circuses wish to continue to own them after the ban is enacted, they will be subject to the appropriate licensing requirements, for example under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 or under the Department’s 2018 licensing regulations for animals hired out for TV or film productions. If a circus does not intend to continue using wild animals in other work, we expect to see retirement plans being deployed under the interim licensing regulations.

Nor will the ban lead to the banning of other animal exhibits such as falconry displays, zoos, farm parks or the sort of displays that we might see at summer fêtes in our constituencies. Even though such activities may move animal displays from one place to another, they do not fall within the ordinary interpretation of a circus and will therefore not meet the definition of a travelling circus. We do not wish to ban them, because we acknowledge that they have a role to play in education. The important distinction is that circuses move from A to B to C, whereas other displays may go to one place, come back to a home base and go to another place some time later—they are a very different activity.

Lastly, the Bill will apply only to wild animals. I know from parliamentary debates and from my Department’s postbag that the overriding concern is about the use of wild animals in travelling circuses, which is precisely what the Bill will address. Other domestic animals such as horses and dogs will continue to be subject to inspections under the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018 to ensure that the highest welfare standards are met.

Continuing to allow wild animals to perform often absurd and unnecessary behaviours for our amusement in travelling circuses goes against the Government’s efforts towards—and the House’s interests in—raising awareness and respect for animals. People can continue to enjoy the experience of going to a circus, but we must move on from the age when wild animals were paraded around as a spectacle. We want people to see animals in a more dignified and natural setting. We cannot make that message clearer than by introducing this Bill to ban that practice. I commend it to the House.

6.58 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Circuses are no place for wild animals. That view is shared not only by animal welfare organisations and animal lovers, but by the vast majority of people in our country and—as I am very glad to see—by hon. Members on both sides of the House. As the Minister said, banning wild animals in circuses is a policy that began under Labour before we lost power in 2010, so we support the Bill. It is long overdue, but we are pleased that, having walked the tightrope of parliamentary time so many times, it has now arrived. I thank Members on both sides of the House for their advocacy for wild animals. This will ensure that we can have the greatest shows: circuses that do not have wild animals in them.

In welcoming the Bill, I want to echo some of the points that have been made by hon. Members. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar), I ask the Minister where the Bill is to increase the penalties for animal cruelty. The Bill before us is welcome, but it is not the only Bill that we need in relation to animal welfare. That is one of the promises that remains missing.

The Welfare of Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (England) Regulations 2012 will expire in 2020. Now is the time to address this issue once and for all. Forcing wild animals to perform in circuses is one of the most archaic and inhumane forms of animal exploitation. We should be clear that we no longer want it to take place in Britain.

According to the latest figures from September, 19 wild animals are owned by the two remaining circuses that use wild animals in their performances. I am very pleased that the six reindeer, four zebras, three camels, three racoons, one fox—which is not for hunting—one macaw and one zebu, which of course is a type of humped cattle, will soon be free from their lives in circuses and able to enjoy the rest of their lives without being put on display for our entertainment.

I have received a few questions about the Bill since I mentioned I would be speaking in the debate. I would be grateful if the Minister set out whether birds are included in the Bill, as a few people want to know. I believe that they are, but it would be helpful if the Minister made it clear for the record in her concluding remarks.

The problem with the current regulations is that if the licensing conditions are met, there is nothing to stop more animals and different types of animals returning to circuses unless further action is taken.

The review of the science on the welfare of wild animals in travelling circuses by Professor Stephen Harris, which was commissioned by the Welsh Government and published in April 2016, provides strong evidence that wild animals in travelling circuses not only suffer poor welfare, but do not have a “life worth living”. Every circus animal matters. That is why we should have no wild animals in our circuses anymore. The report built on existing evidence that shows that the welfare needs of non-domesticated wild animals cannot be met within a travelling circus—a conclusion with which the Opposition agree.

I am sure that all hon. Members are animal lovers. I am sure we can all agree that animals need a suitable environment to live in, an appropriate diet, the ability to

express normal patterns of behaviour and to be housed properly, whether that is with or without other animals, and that they should not suffer. Wild animals that are used in travelling circuses are carted from one venue to another, sometimes in cramped cages and barren trailers, and are taught to perform tricks, often through fear of punishment. In many cases, animals are not suited to the travelling life, where they are denied their most basic needs. When animals suffer, we all suffer.

Labour planned to ban the use of wild animals in circuses before the 2010 general election. The draft legislation had been prepared and consulted on, with a substantial majority of respondents in favour of a ban. While we are pleased that there is finally parliamentary time for this crucial and urgent Bill, it is disappointing that we have been overtaken by no fewer than 30 countries worldwide in banning the use of wild animals in circuses. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for setting out just how many EU member states have banned the use of wild animals in circuses and showing just how paltry was the Government’s line that our EU membership prevented it.

Kerry McCarthy: My intervention on the Minister was long enough, with the long list of countries, so I did not make the point that I wanted to go on to make. The line that we are not allowed to do things because the European Union will not let us has been used frequently by this Department and by the Minister’s predecessors. For example, there were discussions about limiting the journey times for live exports. Other countries were prepared to sign up to that, but the UK was not prepared to take part in those discussions. We need a thorough investigation into how often that has been used as an excuse, because there are a lot of things we could have done on the animal welfare front that are now coming to a head because we might be leaving the European Union. We could actually have done a lot more.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is right: there have been many times when our membership of the European Union has been used as a reason not to do something, when that has not been true. In many cases, the Government have had the power to change the law for the better. We should be using those powers to do so, not find excuses not to do so.

The previous Labour Government published the draft Wild Animals in Circuses Bill in 2013 but sadly did not make time for it to become law. Despite a 2015 manifesto commitment to implement the ban, the Conservative Government failed to introduce the necessary law in the last Parliament. The Government have been dragging their feet for far too long and I am glad that the Minister who introduced the debate has brought forward the Bill. However, every day that the Bill has not been in place, there have been wild animals in circuses in England that should have been free to enjoy life beyond the circus. That is something that the Government’s action can never take back.

The ban has been on the “to do” list for many years. When out celebrating the re-election of Plymouth’s Labour council last week, the leader of the council, Tudor Evans, told me about the controversial measure to ban wild animals in circuses visiting Plymouth back in 1991, when I was only 11. Plymouth City Council had wanted to do that, but it did not have the power to

do it. However, it discovered that it did have the power to ban animals in theatres, so it did. That caused immediate controversy, with the performance of “The Two Gentlemen of Verona” at the Theatre Royal demanding the use of a dog. Apparently, the show went on without the dog, and circuses will go on without wild animals. That is a lesson that we should all be very proud of.

The Minister mentioned that other countries have led the way in introducing a ban on wild animals in circuses. Scotland has introduced a ban and Wales will be introducing a ban this year. What is happening in Northern Ireland on introducing such a ban on wild animals? While there is no Executive, it is hard for some of the rules we pass in this place to be applied in Northern Ireland. I would be grateful if the Minister set that out so that we can ensure that no wild animals are able to be used in circuses in Northern Ireland.

May I ask the Minister about the robust transition that needs to take place? There must be no unintended consequences when the ban comes into effect. The British Veterinary Zoological Society has highlighted potential concerns about the guidance that will be given regarding the future of wild animals that are currently in circuses. There must be a robust transition process in place to ensure their welfare. I am grateful for the answer the Minister gave my fellow south-west MP, the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, on ensuring that all the animals will be rehomed in a good way. However, I would be grateful if the Minister who responds gave further reassurance that not a single wild animal that is used in a circus today will be put down because of the new law. I am sure that there are many animal lovers across the country who would love to rehome any of those animals—the raccoons, the macaw, the zebras, the zebu or the reindeer. We must make sure that no animal dies because of this law.

Turning to unintended consequences, we look forward to scrutinising the Bill in Committee. We will consider what amendments to table to clarify how the Bill will work in practice and to ensure that there are no loopholes that a coach and horses, a zebu, a camel or a raccoon can be driven through. For example, the Bill does not contain a clear definition of the word “circus”, so there could be confusion with the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, which are about the use of snakes that are not commonly domesticated but are under the control of humans. Circuses could therefore fall into both areas. They could say that they have a licence under those regulations and operate as a travelling exhibition if the term “circus” remains undefined.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for setting out that concern. There is a need to tighten the definition and I would be grateful if the Minister looked favourably on attempts by the Opposition and, I suspect, Government Members to do that.

The Opposition will also explore powers to enforce the ban on wild animals in circuses. We will consider what powers will be needed to seize animals that are used in circuses after the ban comes into place, what powers courts should have to disqualify offenders from keeping animals if there is repeat offending, what powers of entry should be extended to constables and appointed

inspectors, and what additional support the Government will give the national wildlife crime unit by extending its funding. There are only 12 officers in the unit, which is nearly one officer per wild animal in a circus today, but it is very important that their excellent work continues after the current funding round comes to an end. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what plans the Government have to extend that funding.

There is never enough animal welfare. We need to give a voice to the animals because they do not have one. That is why it is right that we have heard interventions from both sides of the House in support of greater animal welfare. I am very pleased to be a Labour MP, because Labour is the party of animal welfare. From bringing forward the landmark Hunting Act 2004 to protecting domestic animals under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, Labour has always placed the welfare of animals high on the policy agenda.

The hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) asked about an all-encompassing animal welfare Bill. If the Government choose not to introduce such a Bill, the hon. Gentleman need only vote for a Labour Government. We have made a policy commitment to introduce a broad animal welfare Bill to ensure that all animals are protected, based on our animal welfare plan, which has been published and consulted on.

Labour fought for animal sentience to be part of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, but, sadly, that was voted down by the Government. I hope that it will return as a full provision. At a European level, Labour has helped to secure better welfare standards for battery hens and chickens, and has tightened the rules on the transport of live animals. That is a record of which my party can rightly be proud, but it is also a record that requires us constantly to ask for improvements, and to support animal welfare wherever the animals may be, in the United Kingdom and abroad. My party and, I believe, Members on both sides of the House will continue to do that.

Labour will support the Bill tonight, and I hope that the Minister will take our suggestions on board in the good faith in which they were intended. I think that there is cross-party support for the Bill, not only in the House but among the public. Labour will seek to tighten the rules to ensure that there are no wild animals in our circuses, and that all the wild animals that are currently in circuses can have a good life after their days of entertaining people have come to an end.

7.11 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I support the Bill, not least because, as a Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I spoke in favour of such a Bill on many occasions. As a number of Members have pointed out, it has been on the agenda for some time—it was a manifesto commitment in both 2015 and 2017—and, as the Minister said, the existing licensing regulations will expire in 2020, so it is necessary to ensure that we have something with which to replace them.

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, of which I was a member before I became a Minister, examined this issue in some detail. At that point, the committee proposed a slightly different approach to dealing with this challenge. It proposed an annexe to the Bill listing the animals that would not be allowed to be

[George Eustice]

in travelling circuses: a negative list. We envisaged that the most controversial species—lions, tigers and elephants—would be banned immediately, and that other species, such as snakes and camels, could also be removed in due course. I understand that, in the event, DEFRA took the view that that was over-complicating the issue, given that 19 species were involved, and that a simple ban was what was needed.

As the Minister said, this has been on the agenda since 2011. My hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who has just left the Chamber, initiated a number of debates at that time. The initial debate followed a public reaction to the terrible abuse of Anne the elephant in one of the circuses in this country. I am happy to say that a couple of years ago I visited Longleat safari park, where Anne now has a new home, is being properly cared for, and is ending her days in a suitable fashion.

Now that the Bill is before us, I think it important for us to perform our role as legislators: to scrutinise it, and to ensure that there are no inconsistencies in its application. As the Minister pointed out, it is a rather unusual Bill to deal with the regulation of animal welfare and the way in which we manage animals. It imposes a ban not on the grounds of animal welfare, but on ethical grounds.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I have great respect for the former Minister, as he knows. Does he share my lack of understanding of the fact that animal welfare was never a reason for us to ban wild animals in circuses, and that—as he has just mentioned—we had to find alternative ethical grounds? Surely the Animal Welfare Act 2006 was the appropriate vehicle for these measures.

George Eustice: It was, but, as the hon. Gentleman says, the legal advice was that these were not necessarily animal welfare issues per se.

I support the Bill. I have argued for it, and I want it to be passed. A number of Members have said that it is perhaps a little overdue; I was in the Department and it took time for this to be done, so I cannot criticise others on that front.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

George Eustice: I am going to make some progress.

However, the Bill does raise some anomalies. For instance, two or three of the animals in the list of 19 are camels. They will be banned from circuses in future, but I understand that camel racing takes place in some venues in the country, and that that practice would continue. Only a few years ago, there was a dancing raccoon on “Britain’s Got Talent”, the ITV show. Do we think that that is ethical? If it is not ethical to have a dancing raccoon in a circus, why is it ethical to have one on “Britain’s Got Talent”?

What about falconry displays? They travel from agricultural show to agricultural show. Falcons are wild animals. What is the difference? We are starting to enter borderline territories.

Then there is the issue of snakes. There is a growing trend for the keeping of corn snakes and other exotic pets such as bearded dragons, a type of lizard. Are we convinced that every 10-year-old boy in the land who has a corn snake or a bearded dragon is looking after

that pet adequately? A number of vets are increasingly concerned about the welfare of some of these pets, not least because many vets lack the expertise to deal with their specialist needs. Why is it OK to have pet snakes with, in many cases, no regulation at all unless they are deemed to be a species of dangerous wild animal, while having one in a circus is seen as wrong? And what about reindeer? There is nothing in the Bill to prevent a reindeer from being outside a Santa’s Grotto, yet reindeer in circuses will now be banned.

I have made all those comments not to suggest that I will oppose the Bill—as I have said, I fully support it—but simply to highlight a matter that I think we ought to consider. As we introduce a rather unusual Bill that is based on ethics rather than animal welfare, it will throw up issues that we, and those tasked with implementing the policy, will have to resolve, and we ought to be thinking about those issues now.

7.17 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a privilege to speak for the Scottish National party on this important Bill, which is crucial to future animal welfare legislation. I thank the excellent animal welfare organisations that have campaigned on the issue for many years. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but let me name just a few: the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Animal Defenders International, Animal Justice Project, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

As the Minister said, the Scottish Government passed legislation to ban the use of wild animals in travelling circuses in 2017. Forcing wild animals to travel in circuses and perform confusing and degrading tricks is an outdated practice that has no place in our modern, compassionate society. Animal welfare remains a vital area of concern for the Scottish Government, who will establish a Scottish animal welfare commission to give advice and set best policy standards and practice.

The Bill is important, and is fully supported by the SNP. I know that the Minister has been in contact with the Scottish Government, who agree that it strengthens existing legislation and makes progress for the future. I do not think that “borderline territories” such as those mentioned by the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) are sufficient reason for procrastination, although I note the importance of the points that he raised. I am pleased that steps are being taken now, and that they will lead to further steps, however difficult they may be to resolve in the future.

The Bill is important in many respects. The first relates to animal welfare. There may be only a few animals in today’s circuses in the United Kingdom, but we cannot avoid noticing, with empathy, that they live in cramped travelling conditions. They are often transported in small cages in vans, or in barren trailers. They are taught to perform—owing to their fear of punishment—in artificial surroundings. That is certainly not entertainment, and animals themselves are not entertainment. These practices must not continue anywhere across the UK, and I hope the Governments in Wales and Northern Ireland will quickly follow suit in relation to this legislation.

The second important point is education—education of our future generations—because this is the right thing to do. The right thing to do is to wonder in the resplendence of wild animals in their natural habitats,

behaving in the wild in a way that is entirely free and natural. The right thing to do is to learn respect for wild animals as living beings, not tools of man or money-making objects, to want to do our bit to preserve species and to protect biodiversity, to teach the importance of conserving endangered species for our children and our children's children, and to recognise how wondrous the world is via different cultures and species, and nature and our planet.

The third issue is public awareness and what the public demands. We are all here by courtesy of the public and of the voters in our constituencies. Public consultation has consistently found that 94.5%, and similar high percentages, of respondents in all areas of the UK support a ban, because the public know that circuses do not provide animals with psychologically or physically healthy lives. The public abhor the abuse in circuses that has been uncovered by Animal Defenders International, whose members have gone undercover and investigated British circuses over the past 20 years to expose it. They realise, as per the work of Professor Stephen Harris at Bristol University, that the life of animals in circuses does not constitute a good life or even a life worth living.

As others have said, the Minister should consider funding for the national wildlife crime unit; this issue was raised during the good work done on the Ivory Act 2018 and it must be addressed.

We must now join cross-party and work together to do all we can to secure the swift progress of this Bill. I thank all MPs here today, and MPs past and present who have wholeheartedly supported a ban over the decades; today they can be proud because we take this step towards this ban together built on their efforts in the name of improving animal welfare standards for the good of the animals and society.

7.22 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

I welcome the Bill, but further to what my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—I do call him an hon. Friend—said, I am interested in why this is being done on ethical rather than animal welfare grounds. Government lawyers have made heavy weather of this Bill. As several Members across the House have said, we have been dealing with this for a long time; this was one of the first issues that I dealt with when I came into the House in 2010, and it rumbled on and on through various Secretaries of State, and now we have finally got there, which I greatly welcome.

When I asked a question of the Minister just now and said that the animals were not wild, I suppose that technically I was wrong, but the point I wanted to make is that they are neither wild nor domesticated because they have been so used to performing in circuses and to being taken around. I am not saying that was the right thing to do to them, but we cannot just suddenly turn them back into the wild, because they are not strictly wild animals. If we put the reindeer back into Norway or Sweden or wherever they could roam naturally, I am not sure for one moment that they would survive. That is the issue: we have to make sure that not only are these animals banned from travelling circuses but they are

looked after. The No. 1 priority is that they are not put down of course, but they do need to be looked after properly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), a previous agriculture Minister, made the further point that lots of other types of animals—snakes, lizards and all sorts of things—are being kept for various reasons. We live in a block of flats in Battersea and, interestingly, mice and dead chicks are brought in. I am not sure the inhabitants of the flats are eating those chicks; I think we will find that snakes and other animals are eating them. So lots of animals are being kept across the piece and we must make sure they are looked after properly. We cannot expect this Bill to deal with that, but the point has been made that it is interesting what people will keep in their homes, and then there is the question of whether their homes are fit for it and whether they should be keeping them. There are also all sorts of other animals, such as primates, that should not be kept at home, and we must deal with that.

I do not wish to detain the House for long as this Bill has cross-party support and I welcome that, and we have done a lot of work in the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on these matters previously and now. However, I also want to make the point that we really want the five-year sentencing for animal welfare crimes. We have the ridiculous situation at the moment that someone who beats a dog to death gets a maximum sentence of six months and if they plead guilty they get an automatic 30% or 40% reduction, so they end up serving four months. This is not right, and every time we want to tag this measure on to one Bill or another it never seems to be the right Bill, so I urge the Government that it is time that that was done.

We can all work together on this, but the point has been made that there are other species that we need to look at. I welcome the fact that the 19 animals from both the Circus Mondao and Peter Jolly's will no longer be able to perform after 2020, but I reiterate that we must make sure they are properly looked after afterwards, a point that I think we all agree on across the House.

7.26 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful to be called to participate briefly in this uncontroversial and consensual debate, and it is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish); although we sit on opposite sides of the House, we are on very good terms and share a lot of common ground, especially on animal welfare issues. Like him, and everyone else who has spoken and is likely to speak, I support the Bill, and I congratulate the Government and the Minister on bringing it forward. I am grateful to the RSPCA, the British Veterinary Association, Animal Defenders International, the Born Free Foundation and the Commons Library for their briefings and assistance.

This Bill has been quite a long time getting here. Its provisions were omitted from the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and picked up again by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in 2009, following continued lobbying by animal welfare groups. I was Minister of State then, and the consultation in 2009 that we held on this issue, as mentioned by the Minister, led me and the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

Rural Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), to say approaching the 2010 general election that if re-elected we were minded to ban wild animals in circuses, but of course we never got the chance. The coalition then ran into a number of the same obstacles Labour had encountered when in office, and immediately the Bill was back in the slow lane.

Various explanations followed, such as that it was a European matter, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), and that it could not be determined by nation states. The suspicion arose that there was a departmental disagreement between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and DEFRA and the Government could not agree on a unified position, or it was said that a licensing regime could do the job better. However, as has been said, neither side of the House was persuaded by any of the explanations and there were various debates, oral questions, written parliamentary questions, ten-minute rule Bills, lobbies and public pressure, all the way to the next general election in 2015. At that time, every main political party went into the general election committed to a ban. Public support has always been high, at more than 70%, and the consultation we held in 2009 showed that more than 94% were in support of a ban.

It is not difficult to conclude that transporting wild animals around the country in heavy goods vehicles and keeping them in temporary confined spaces for the duration of visits to various locations is not in the best interest of the animals, physically or psychologically, and that it is contrary to their welfare. I am sure that the public got that before the Government did. There is confusion as to whether this is an animal welfare issue or an ethical one. I understand that there are some separations, but locking wild animals up in HGVs and transporting them around the country, then putting them in small temporary enclosures for the duration of visits, is primarily an animal welfare issue. If taking the ethics route gets the job done, I am happy to do that, but I believe that there is a fundamental animal welfare question here as well.

The British Veterinary Association concludes:

“The welfare needs of non-domesticated, wild animals cannot be met within a travelling circus—in terms of housing or being able to express normal behaviour.”

That is what I think is called a no-brainer. The RSPCA has raised four issues that it wants to see addressed in Committee. Several of them have already been mentioned, so I will not repeat the arguments, but the headings are: the definition of a travelling circus; the power of the courts to disqualify individuals from keeping wild animals; the limits of appointed inspectors; and the powers to seize animals. The Minister has generously indicated that both Ministers will be prepared to discuss all those matters in Committee.

Given that we have all waited so long, we want the best conclusion and the best Bill. We want to ensure that it is as fit for purpose as we can make it. Given the assurances that we have received from the Minister, I am looking forward to the Committee stage of the Bill. I am confident that we will continue to adopt the consensual tone that has characterised this Second Reading debate and that we will get the Bill on the statute book in less time than it has taken to get to this point.

7.32 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for taking the Bill through our parliamentary process. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), for his dedication in seeing it through and for his detailed explanation of the Bill today.

Many Members have been involved in campaigning for this ban over many years. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who rightly distinguishes between the conditions that a wild animal experiences while on the road and during and in between performances, and those of an animal in a conservation park or zoo, where animals can be enclosed in areas reflecting their native environment, where the public benefit from gaining knowledge and where they will therefore be better able to support the work of breeding programmes and wider conservation.

Yesterday, while welcoming a delegation of Indian travel company representatives to Muncaster Castle as part of a VisitBritain campaign to encourage the visitor economy in Copeland, we enjoyed an incredible display of sky hunters, including owls, hawks and vultures flying high in the sky and swooping and diving, with the mountains of the English Lake district as their backdrop. These experiences capture our imagination and dazzle, while also teaching us about natural habits, abilities and vulnerabilities. For example, we learned yesterday that vultures are perilously close to extinction. These opportunities and organisations have my full support. However, making wild animals travel in crates and perform unnatural tasks for our amusement does not have my support and nor does it have the support of the public.

If successful, the Bill will become an Act of Parliament preventing the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. As world leaders in animal welfare, we are strengthening our position as animal protectors. The Bill follows a long list of other protections making progress in the House, including making CCTV mandatory in slaughterhouses, improving puppy welfare and bringing about one of the world's toughest bans on ivory sales.

Prison sentences for animal abusers have been increased and I look forward to a ban on the live export of animals for slaughter when we leave the EU.

The ban in this Bill would not be possible without the vast amount of work carried out by the DEFRA team, officials and organisations such as the RSPCA, all of whom have got us this far. I put on record my thanks to all of them as the Bill, which I will be supporting in the Lobby tonight, makes progress through Parliament.

7.35 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): As we have heard from so many hon. Members today, this Bill is long overdue. We have heard about the many earlier attempts to get this ban on the statute book. A statement from the Government in 2012 indicated that they were going to pursue this path, so the Bill today is well overdue.

My constituents have been contacting me about this issue since I became a Member of Parliament, and I know that people feel strongly about it. Indeed, a change.org petition on the subject attracted more than 200,000 signatures—I know that many of my constituents signed

it—and there have been other e-petitions along the way. It is about time that we moved on from this archaic practice and recognised that our entertainment comes at a huge price—the welfare and care of the animals that are moved from place to place in poor conditions and under a great deal of stress. As I have said, this Bill is well overdue.

In 2010, a Labour Government public consultation found that 94.5% of respondents supported a ban, which really is not surprising. Animals in circuses are subjected to brutal training methods and violence, which have no place in our society. I am glad that it looks as though a ban will finally be imposed. As others have said, it is frustrating that we are way behind the times in this country. Many countries across the globe have already implemented similar bans, and it is simply unacceptable that the UK is left lagging behind other countries with regard to animal welfare standards in circuses. Furthermore, recent research shows that animal freedoms and animal rights are not being adhered to, even though people care very much about them. That is why I am keen to speak in this debate.

Hon. Members have referred to various issues that will require work in Committee. They include the definition of a travelling circus; the powers to seize animals; liability; the disqualification of offenders from keeping wild animals; and the power of entry. I am sure that all those details can be dealt with in Committee. A key issue is the definition of a travelling circus, and I hope that great consideration will be given to ensuring that people's concerns are addressed in that respect.

I am glad to see this Bill coming forward, but a lot of other important animal legislation is needed and my constituents are certainly keen to see it passed. The issue of recognising animal sentience has been mentioned, as has the fact that we missed the opportunity to include that in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. We have also talked about longer sentences for animal cruelty and about extending the scope of the Ivory Act 2018, which will be familiar territory for many people in the Chamber today.

I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us about the fate of the animals that are currently in circuses. Can he confirm that what happens to them will be monitored? The question of monitoring is a consistent theme when we look at legislation to protect wildlife; it was also discussed during the passage of the Ivory Bill. The same concerns apply to the strengthening of the National Wildlife Crime Unit. Can the Minister confirm that the unit's funding will be continued?

7.39 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and to take part in this debate. Times change, and when they do we have to change the rules and regulations to reflect mindsets. To some in this House, it might seem like only yesterday that films such as "The Greatest Show on Earth", with Dorothy Lamour and Charlton Heston, were great hits because they had the romance and excitement of circus life.

If we fast-forward to just a few weeks ago, as a father I made probably the worst decision I have ever made in my life when I decided to take my three daughters to see the remake of "Dumbo". My eldest daughter, Imogen, just about managed to survive with some degree of

stoicism. My middle daughter, Jessica, cried five times during the film. My youngest daughter, Laura, had to be taken out of the cinema by me, so upset had she become by the film. I have to say I was rather relieved because I, too, was finding the film rather upsetting. The question they asked at the rescue centre afterwards—also known as Pizza Express Dorchester—was, "Why? Why would you have an elephant in a circus? Why would you treat an elephant like that?" I think that just shows the change in our society.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Everyone in the Chamber is completely committed to the welfare of animals, including me, but will my hon. Friend think about what he is saying? If he is saying that an animal does not belong in a circus—I accept that that is what the vast majority of people believe is right—does he think that animals in other contexts should be where they are? Does an animal belong in a zoo? Does a horse belong on a racecourse? Does a greyhound belong in a greyhound stadium? He has to look at the implications and precedent that legislation sets.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think I can help, because what the hon. Gentleman asks would broaden the debate outside the scope of circuses. The Bill is about circus animals. It is not about breeding programmes in zoos or different things. The hon. Gentleman is comparing horses and dogs to a circus, but the Bill is about wild animals in circuses. I would like to keep the debate contained to the subject before us.

Simon Hoare: If I may, I will reply briefly and within order to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) raised. Representing Romford, he would be a very brave man to suggest that greyhound racing should be stopped. He makes a valid point. I can well remember being taken as a young boy to Barry zoo, which Vale of Glamorgan Council eventually closed because it was so fiendishly awful and the treatment of its animals was so bad. Standards have to reflect the very highest standards of animal welfare.

Those days have gone. When circuses were at their most popular and wild animals were in use, circuses could say, "We are doing some sort of education as well." However, the likes of David Attenborough and co have changed that. We can be educated in our own homes about wild animals in their natural habitats and we can get more information and education in that way. Those people do that important job in a much better way.

I can remember as a boy being taken—my mother is still not entirely sure why—to Gerry Cottle and Billy Smart's circus when it performed in Cardiff. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) nodding almost with reminiscence at those names. We never left those circuses elevated by joy; we left with a terrible feeling of sadness. There was something alien, wrong and outdated about it, even in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It just goes to show that sometimes this place needs to find ways of moving far more quickly to better reflect changes in mindset.

I was pleased and proud to be a co-sponsor when my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) brought forward a Bill on this issue in February 2016. I am delighted to see him in his place. I remember, as on similar occasions, that it was opposed by my hon. Friend

[Simon Hoare]

the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope). I have to say that anything opposed by him usually seems a good thing in my book.

I am delighted by this Bill. I am grateful that Ministers are bringing it forward. I know that the numbers we are talking about are low, but I view the Bill as a sender of a message and an articulation of a set of values. It is also an insurance policy. Were there to be a European renaissance of wild animals performing in circuses, through this legislation the message would go out from the House and across our parties that such circuses would not be welcome in the UK.

7.45 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I have no need to repeat the sound case made by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), or to mention the interventions by other Members that he picked up, other than to reiterate that my party very much supports the Bill. My hon. Friends and I have done what we can to ensure that the Bill is finally before the House.

I understand the point made by the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) about other situations in which animals find themselves, but I do not believe that that would justify the House not taking this step. The points he makes provide very good reasons for demanding a coherent, up-to-date and comprehensive animal welfare Bill in the near future to take forward the intentions of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. However, let us not let our anxiety to cover the gamut of animal welfare lead us to rewrite the starting point of this Bill.

Andrew Rosindell: Would the hon. Gentleman clarify something? Does he feel that the legislation should be extended to performing animals—animals in adverts or films? Where would he extend it to? At what point would he say it is okay for a wild animal or any creature to take part in something? Would he stop at circuses, or would he go further?

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I said, we should not allow our wish to have a comprehensive animal welfare Bill to get in the way of our passing this specific Bill, which has the support of the whole House.

The way we treat animals is often a litmus test of how we treat human beings and I believe that the steps we are taking in this country and around the world to show not only kindness but respect to other creatures are important in creating the consciousness we desperately need if we are to protect our planet and all its creatures.

So many people in this country are concerned about our treatment of animals, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) emphasised. People have hopes for a better world and a million dreams ride on our better relationship with our fellow creatures. Even if all the animals performing in circuses in this country were healthy and happy, there is something fundamentally demeaning about using animals to do tricks for our entertainment and we should not be encouraging it.

Animal welfare is an ethical issue. Although it is true that only 19 wild animals are currently performing in circuses in England and Wales, this is meaningful legislation. There is no guarantee in the licensing system currently

in operation that that number could not grow. Indeed, the licensing regime ends in January next year. Unless we pass the Bill in time, so that it comes into operation in January, there is a danger that there will be no restrictions on the use of wild animals in circuses. We do not want to see the humiliation of lions, tigers and bears coming alive in our circuses once again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned other countries that have already implemented the ban, but we need to be aware of the appalling cruelty meted out to various animals in other countries, such as bears milked for their bile in China or beach donkeys in Santorini. How can we argue for decent treatment for animals around the world unless we are seen to be above reproach in this country?

Most circuses in this country stopped using wild animals years ago, and I believe that some of the biggest circuses made that decision entirely voluntarily before the licensing system was ever introduced because they recognised from first-hand experience that it is no longer acceptable for circuses to feature such acts. However, unless we act to implement a ban, there is a continuing danger that other less scrupulous circuses will take trade away from those that have made the ethical choice. We need to act now to enable those that have behaved honourably in this matter to flourish.

Above all, I am amazed it has taken us so long to get to this stage. After my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) introduced his ten-minute rule Bill in September 2014, was it really necessary for hon. Members to object to it 12 times; it was finally dropped in April 2015? And did an hon. Member really need to object to the ten-minute rule Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) in 2015?

A similar Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) fell due to the general election in 2017. An almost identical private Member's Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) was due to be heard in October but, if the Government had not taken it on, it would almost certainly have been blocked by an hon. Member, just as the Bills on upskirting and female genital mutilation were blocked.

It is a great relief that the Government have finally taken on this Bill, but it is a matter of regret that we could not have dealt with this issue before now. I fully agree with the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) that the Government need to get on with the Animal Cruelty (Sentencing) Bill, too.

This Bill is long overdue, and it has the full support of every party and of the campaigning groups that have worked to get us to this point. I look forward to it passing into law at the earliest possible moment.

7.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

It is my pleasure and privilege to respond to this debate, and I thank hon. and right hon. Members from all parties for their contributions. I am encouraged by the general consensus in the House that this Bill addresses an important question about the treatment of wild animals, and I am convinced it can make quick progress, which is clearly the desire of hon. Members present today.

Many animal welfare charities, veterinary groups and, of course, parliamentarians have been calling for this ban, and I recognise the huge public support for it, too. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), is particularly grateful to the RSPCA, the Born Free Foundation and the British Veterinary Association for their support on this matter.

Public attitudes have clearly changed over time, and we now recognise that wild animals no longer belong in travelling circuses. Unfortunately, the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) is not yet back in his place—perhaps he is not as quick as a zebra or a racing camel—but there were 10,572 responses to the consultation issued in 2009, and an additional 2,500 postcards. Approximately 95% of those who responded to the consultation suggested that the best way to improve welfare would be to ban the use of wild animals in travelling circuses.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and the whole team has done a great job on this Bill. I apologise for being late, but I was at the World Wildlife Fund launch of “Our Planet”, which is another wonderful Attenborough film about biodiversity and protecting our wonderful cornucopia of wild species. It seems so timely that we are discussing this Bill in a week when the UN has published a big report on declining species. It is more important than ever that we make our mark by saying that we cannot have wild animals performing for us in circuses.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the state of biodiversity in the world. I was privileged to be at the G7 summit when we had a presentation from the intergovernmental science-policy platform on biodiversity and ecosystem services on this issue, and I can assure her that the leading countries of the world are actively working together and have declared the Metz charter on biodiversity. She is right to stress the importance of wild animals being in their normal places, rather than providing unusual forms of entertainment, which is what the Bill seeks to address.

Andrew Rosindell: I wholeheartedly endorse the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). Can the Minister tell the House how we will define “wild animal”? That is central to this Bill and we need a clear definition of where we stand, as some countries have definitions that are different from what we may be considering.

Dr Coffey: I can answer my hon. Friend directly, because clause 1(5) states that

“‘wild animal’ means an animal of a kind which is not commonly domesticated in Great Britain.”

I hope that answers his point.

The Scottish Government’s 2014 consultation ahead of their ban showed similar figures in support, and last year’s consultation by the Welsh Government on a proposed ban found some 97% in favour. As my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said earlier, this is an outdated practice that no longer reflects the views of modern society, and I am pleased that we have started the Bill’s passage through Parliament.

My hon. Friend has already replied to some of the points raised in this debate, and he was generous in saying that some of the issues that have been raised can be considered in Committee, and it is important that they are.

On the European Union and the limits of legislation, there was a legal challenge to the ban introduced by Austria under the European services directive. I am confident the Government did not say a ban could not be introduced, but we had to wait for the outcome of that challenge to understand how we can properly legislate to do this. The legal challenge failed, which has given us confidence to bring this Bill forward.

It is also worth pointing out to the House that, although we have heard about a number of countries that have banned wild animals in circuses, many of the exemptions are a lot more generous than the Bill allows for. We have come up with an exemplary Bill that will be more comprehensive than the legislation in other countries.

Are birds included? If they meet the definition of “wild animal” in clause 1(5), they will be included.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and a number of other Members mentioned the Animal Cruelty (Sentencing) Bill, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary is conscious of that. He is responsible for animal welfare—I tend to deal with wild animals—and we are both committed, as is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, to making sure that we find the appropriate parliamentary vehicle to do so.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) asked about Northern Ireland, and the Administration have been consulted on this issue. As it stands, the Administration do not believe it is appropriate at this point to join in this Bill, recognising it is a significant policy decision and would need to be devolved.

I assure the House that we have been told by the owners of the two circuses that they will not be putting down any animals as a consequence of this Bill. Indeed, their retirement plans are already in place, as my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary made clear.

A variety of questions have been asked about the potential definitions and about the amendments that might be tabled, such as on powers to seize an animal. Where any evidence is found of a wild animal being mistreated, the Animal Welfare Act will, of course, apply and provides powers to seize animals should there be grounds to do so. The Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 also provides powers of seizure and, depending on the species of animal, may also be applicable. We have not provided powers to seize animals where it is demonstrated that an offence has been committed, but inspectors have powers to video or photograph an animal to provide evidence of such an offence.

Several Members mentioned the national wildlife crime unit, for which there is funding here, but I am sure the House understands that the Government will shortly be starting their spending review. I have no doubt that my Department will be pushing for the unit to continue being funded because we believe it has an important role in tackling wildlife crime. Indeed, the unit received additional funding from the Department to address new avenues of wildlife crime.

The Conservative party introduced the most important piece of legislation, on which we still heavily rely, the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. We have had additional

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

legislation specific to badgers and wild mammals in 1992 and 1996. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 was another milestone in making sure that appropriate legislation was put in place.

On biodiversity, I am pleased about our position on international obligations; I genuinely believe the passing of the Ivory Act 2018 will be a significant element in that.

On the welfare of pets such as snakes, we were asked why it is okay to have no regulations. In fact, there are regulations; these animals are covered by the Animal Welfare Act, as they are seen as animals that are cared for, as opposed to other kinds of animals that may be used in so-called performances, be it in Santa's grotto or elsewhere. The new Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) England Regulations 2018 apply to those, and there is a specific reason in respect of what is happening in circuses. This Bill does not seek to prohibit wild animals in other activities; it is not a loophole. Those regulations specifically require those activities to be licensed.

There has been a lot of discussion about ethical and welfare matters, and why one thing is happening and not the other. The Government are clear, and have been for some time, including under previous Administrations, that the scope of the 2006 Act did not give the necessary powers in this regard. Section 12 provides powers only to regulate to promote the welfare of animals. I appreciate that people, including hon. Members, may have different views on this. No robust scientific evidence is available to indicate that the basic welfare needs of wild animals cannot be met in a travelling circus environment. Moreover, the review of the Department's interim circus regulations found that the regulations were successful in establishing an effective licensing scheme to promote and monitor high welfare standards for wild animals in travelling circuses in England.

Andrew Rosindell: I wish to clarify something for the benefit of the whole House and everyone outside who works with animals, including performing animals. The Minister mentioned Santa's grotto, and we have all seen animals in our constituencies for different special events. Can she tell the House how this new law will affect such events? In line with the question I posed earlier, may I ask where the ultimate end to this is? Is she saying that, ultimately, animals will not be able to take part in any kind of performance, be it a film, special activity or outside event? Where will this conclude?

Dr Coffey: This is specifically about circuses, and the basis for it is the itinerant nature of such events and what happens when these animals are moved. Falconry and displays have been mentioned. Typically, a falcon returns to its principal place of residence after such a display, so the effect is not the same. I assure my hon. Friend that mobile zoos will still be mobile, but of course licensing is undertaken, through the 2018 regulations.

Let me return specifically to the evidence. My understanding is that after the 2006 Act came into place, the academic lawyer Mike Radford was appointed to chair a circus working group. His report concluded that there were no welfare concerns over and above those applying to animals kept in other captive

environments, and therefore any attempt to take forward a ban on welfare grounds under the 2006 Act would fail the test of proportionality and primary legislation would be needed. I should also point out to the House that that is also the legal position of the Scottish and Welsh Governments, and that the bans that have been brought forward have been justified on ethical, not welfare, grounds.

Let me deal with some other aspects of questions that have been asked. I think I have addressed the questions asked by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), and I welcome the fact that the legislative consent motion will go through to make sure that the amendment is passed and the legislation has a smooth passage. I have already addressed the question about animal sentencing and when that can be undertaken.

I am very conscious of the strong support given today by hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), my hon. Friends the Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), for Tiverton and Honiton and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), the hon. Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) and for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, and my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). A variety of people have decided to attend this debate and support this Bill. I hope that that support will continue in Committee. It is an honour to have closed this debate. We care passionately about this and I am sure the same spirit will continue as the Bill makes its passage through the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

WILD ANIMALS IN CIRCUSES (NO. 2) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7),

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 23 May 2019.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on Consideration.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Jeremy Quin.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 4 to 7 together.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (BROADCASTING)

That the draft Electronic Communications (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 19 March, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (TRANSPORT)

That the Railways (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 826), dated 5 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 April, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (HEALTH AND SAFETY)

That the Railways (Safety Management) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 825), dated 5 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 8 April, be approved.

That the Rail Safety (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 837), dated 5 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 9 April, be approved.—(*Jeremy Quin.*)

Question agreed to.

Food Poverty: Scotland

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeremy Quin.)

8.5 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I want to start by reflecting on a scene from Ken Loach's 2016 film "I, Daniel Blake", where Katie Morgan, overcome with hunger, begins to eat cold baked beans from a can in her local food bank. Hayley Squires' powerful performance as Katie struck a chord with people. It was a stark reminder of the real impact that food poverty has in communities across the UK.

In 2015, NHS Health Scotland conducted its initial research on the nature and extent of food poverty in Scotland, finding that food poverty arose because of individuals being on a very low income or facing destitution. That restricts their choice of what food they can buy as well as when and where they can buy it. The research highlighted that food poverty also had negative impacts on an individual's health and wellbeing. Other research undertaken in the UK has found a link between food poverty and certain medical conditions or illnesses.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. It is appropriate that he cited "I, Daniel Blake". Does he agree that many of those on low incomes find themselves working in the public sector for UK Government Departments, where they have had a public sector pay freeze for at least 10 years, and are having to rely on food banks because of the poverty pay they are on?

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, and I would agree with that point, because the wages have not matched the rises in food prices.

International research has also found that the more severe a person's experience of food insecurity, the more likely they are to seek help from healthcare services. Further international studies have shown that going hungry just a handful of times can lead an individual to develop poorer mental and physical health. Both this domestic and international research emphasises that food poverty is a public health issue. I welcome the Scottish Government's recognition of food poverty being a public health issue. The inclusion of questions on food insecurity in the 2018 Scottish health survey was a positive step. The survey revealed those who are most likely to find themselves living in food poverty across Scotland; 18% of those in deprived areas live in food poverty, which compares with a figure of just 3% in the least deprived areas.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. In my constituency and across Northern Ireland we have some of the highest levels of poverty among children and families. Does he agree that it is essential that we seek to protect the most vulnerable in our society, who are having to choose either to eat or heat? The Government must do more on pension credit. Does he agree that they should put more emphasis on the accessing of pension credit by vulnerable people to enable them to deal with the poverty they clearly have? May I also say that it is nice to see the Under-Secretary of State for

[Jim Shannon]

Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), and that we look forward to a good response from him?

Hugh Gaffney: I was actually coming on to that point about heat or eat. It is a very well used phrase, but perhaps it should be used more often. Some 13% of 16 to 44-year-olds live in food poverty compared with just 1% of those over 65. A total of 21% of single parents also live in food poverty—what a shameful situation. The UK is the world's fifth largest economy, yet the Scottish Health Survey revealed that one in 10 Scots lives in food poverty.

The Independent Food Aid Network had identified 2,000 food banks currently operating in the UK, 212 of which are in Scotland. I pay tribute to the volunteers at all food banks, particularly to those at the Coatbridge community food bank and the Viewpark food bank in my constituency. They work tirelessly to support families who find themselves in food poverty as a result of the austerity policies pursued by this Government. I have previously supported the Coatbridge community food bank to secure an additional warehouse, and I will support those volunteers looking to establish a food bank in Moodiesburn as well.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so generous in giving way. He quite rightly praises the food bank volunteers and provides me with the opportunity to praise the great work of the Glasgow South West food bank, but does he agree that if it were not for the generosity of his constituents and my constituents these food banks would not exist? It is the community that should be thanked for its generosity.

Hugh Gaffney: I agree wholeheartedly. Where would we be in this country without the volunteers? Let us ask the volunteers to take a day off and then see how this country survives. I say thanks to all the volunteers who get involved.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point in thanking the volunteers and those who donate to food banks. The ones who are listed in the numbers do not cover the full gamut of people who provide help. The mosques, the churches and the gurdwaras in my constituency are also very generous in making sure that people can get a hot meal when they need it. Does he agree that those are also a valuable part of the community that contributes so much?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I do agree. In fact, I was in Bellshill West Parish Church last week and spoke to the ladies who are involved in this work in the community. These are people who are not recognised as helpers, but they do a tremendous job helping out to fill the gaps—no, they do more than that.

I wish that we did not have to live in a country where food banks are needed in constituencies such as mine across the country. NHS Health Scotland recognises that food banks are a symbol of a food poverty crisis in Scotland. It states that

“the existence of emergency food aid provision reflects the growth of chronic severe food poverty.”

The Trussell Trust is the single largest food bank provider in Scotland. It distributed more than 170,000 food parcels in 2017-18, which meant that Scotland received the second highest number of food parcels distributed in the UK by the Trussell Trust. In their recent research, the Independent Food Aid Network and A Menu for Change also examined the role of independent food bank providers in Scotland. They found that the Trussell Trust and the independent food banks collectively distributed more than 480,000 food parcels across Scotland in 2017-18. Let me repeat that figure—480,000 food parcels across Scotland.

In North Lanarkshire, 27,000 food parcels were distributed by food banks in 2017-18. The Trussell Trust also revealed that 5,000 of those food parcels were three-day emergency supplies. I want to send my best wishes to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex on the birth of their baby boy, but have to reflect on the fact that there are many children in my constituency who will not enjoy the same chances in life and who are living in food poverty.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. The points that he is making are very important. I also congratulate the food banks in my own area in Ruchill Kelvinside Parish Church and Gairbraid Parish Church, which distribute food on behalf of the Trussell Trust. Does he agree that, when we talk about support, it is not just the quantity of food that people have access to that is hugely important, but the quality of food? They need the right kind of nutrition, and that is particularly important when we think of free school meals for younger children. It should not simply be food for fuel, but food that properly nourishes them.

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that very important point. It is not about the price of the food, but about the quality of the food.

Indeed, the Trussell Trust revealed that three-day emergency supplies were sent to 1,800 households with children in North Lanarkshire. I agree with Dr Mary Anne McLeod of A Menu for Change when she says that these figures are truly shameful for Scotland. They are, and I hope that they will serve as a call to action.

Chris Stephens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He is being very generous. Like me, does he have evidence from food banks that the demand for their services rockets by as much as 30% when universal credit kicks in or is rolled out in a particular area?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I agree with that. The demand has gone through the roof. In fact, Coatbridge food bank has now doubled the size of its unit—I helped them to achieve that. That is not what I was going to say, but that is what has happened anyway.

We must look at the underlying causes of food poverty in Scotland. Oxford University carried out research into food bank users across the UK in 2017. It found that every two in five food bank users were waiting for benefit payments, with the delay in receiving payments being the primary cause of their food bank use. One in six households using food banks had at least one person in work, but that was often insecure employment, such as a job on a zero-hours contract. Food bank users were

also found to have monthly household incomes of no greater than £500. Some 16% were even found to have no income at all in the month before they became a food bank user. The food poverty crisis is clearly driven by low pay, insecure employment and the Government's welfare reforms.

Alison Thewliss: The hon. Gentleman is making a good point about the causes of food poverty that are driving people to food banks. Some of my constituents have been designated as having no recourse to public funds and, despite being in work, they cannot earn enough money to feed their families and are forced to go to food banks. Does he agree that no recourse to public funds is a policy that this Government should ditch?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I do agree. I also believe that the Scottish Government could act as well. It is time for both the UK and the Scottish Governments to act. The devolution of welfare powers to the Scottish Parliament allows the Scottish Government to make different choices. They could listen to Scottish Labour's calls to scrap the two-child cap and top-up child benefit by £5 per week. They could choose to not delay the implementation of the income supplement until 2022. Scots living in food poverty now cannot continue to suffer because of the Scottish Government's inaction.

The UK Government have made a welcome commitment that they will seek to include an official measure of food insecurity in the annual Department for Work and Pensions survey of household incomes and living standards, but I have concerns as to whether the data collected will then be assessed by the Government to help them develop policies to combat food poverty. Data about the level of food bank use in Scotland already exists, thanks to the work of organisations such as the Independent Food Aid Network. I asked the Government whether they used that data to make an assessment of the level of food bank use in Scotland and how to address it, but I was told that the Government had made no such assessment. If the Government will not use the data that is already available, how can we be sure that they will use data collected in the future to help them develop policies to tackle food poverty?

Jim Shannon: There has been an 18% increase in the use of food banks in my constituency because of delays and reductions in benefit payments, and an increase in debt. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those who are involved in the food banks are often forgotten in these debates? In my constituency, all the churches come together and make contributions collectively. Is it not time that we recognised the contributions of all the good people who make such efforts?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes. I repeat: where would we be without the volunteers and the people who help to support the food banks?

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I pay tribute to the many organisations in my constituency—the gurdwaras, churches and mosques—that do so much to address this issue, and to the tremendous volunteers who assist. Would the hon. Gentleman agree that the Scottish Government are trying to address food poverty and sort it out without having the powers to address the welfare cuts and benefits freeze from the UK Government

that lie behind so much of the food poverty, and that they are really operating with one hand tied behind their back?

Hugh Gaffney: I disagree; both Governments can do more to address food poverty across the UK.

The Trussell Trust has rightly highlighted the impact of the Government's welfare reforms on the level of food bank use. Even the Secretary of State herself appears to accept that there is a link between universal credit and food bank use. I hope that she will now respond positively to the calls of the Trussell Trust and immediately end the five-week wait for universal credit payments. I also want the Chancellor to end the benefits freeze immediately. The Government have the responsibility to end low pay and insecure employment in the UK economy.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important issue to the House. I also thank all the excellent food banks in my constituency, including Loaves and Fishes, Greenhills Methodist church and Calderglen food bank. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the callous cashless providers are not helping in this scenario, as they are charging people—particularly people in rural poverty who have no means or very limited funds to travel to other areas—to access their own cash, and that those providers are actually exacerbating food poverty and poverty in general?

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point, because I have seen this happening a lot in my own area recently. There are some deprived places in my constituency, and the shops are starting to charge money at the ATMs. It is okay for me—I can walk away and refuse to use that ATM—but I understand that some people are trapped, and instead of getting £10, they are getting £8. It is an absolutely scandalous practice that has to end. That issue could be another huge debate in itself.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman made a very important point about the five-week wait for universal credit payment. Will he confirm that he has constituents like I have in Glasgow South West who are scared to take the advance payment of two weeks' universal credit because it will only exacerbate their debt?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes, I know people who worry about borrowing, and try to borrow from their family and friends rather than having to pay back this loan, which I believe also accrues some interest and puts them back even further.

Professor Philip Alston visited the UK back in November, and spoke to volunteers and food bank users as part of his research into poverty in the UK. His report for the United Nations concluded that food banks were a symptom—a symptom of this Government's complete denial of the impact of austerity on the poorest in our society. I hope that the Government will snap out of their denial and start showing willingness to act. I stress that that goes for the Scottish Government as well.

I pay tribute to Labour-led North Lanarkshire Council's fantastic Club 365 programme, which is free to attend for primary school pupils who receive free school meals, and ensures that they do not go hungry at the weekends or during the school holidays. North Lanarkshire Council

[*Hugh Gaffney*]

helps to feed our children 365 days a year. I remember attending a meeting that looked at the positive impact of Club 365 on the lives of children in my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, as well as across North Lanarkshire. A Conservative councillor was moved to tears at that meeting; he never realised that the problem was so big.

Club 365 highlights that food poverty can be tackled when the political will exists. I hope that both the UK and Scottish Governments will now show that they have that political will. Let us not make “Oliver” a reality for more of our children: “Please Sir, can I have some more?” I say no more—no more children and their families going hungry in Scotland. If the UK Government can remove the smokescreen of Brexit, and the Scottish Government can remove the distraction of indyref 2, 3, 4 and 5, maybe we can end food poverty.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call the Minister—and I welcome you to the Dispatch Box.

8.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): Thank you for your kind words, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (*Hugh Gaffney*) for securing this debate on this important issue. He is a passionate campaigner on this issue, and he knows me well enough to know that I share his passion for reducing poverty, food insecurity and disadvantage.

I must confess that I have not yet, in the handful of weeks in which I have been in this post, had the opportunity to visit Scotland. I hope to correct that at the earliest available opportunity, perhaps even alongside the hon. Gentleman or a number of the other representatives from Scotland who are here. I am absolutely keen, new in post, to get out and about as much as possible, meeting DWP staff, charities, claimants, vulnerable groups, and, of course, Members of this House to gain a better understanding across the country of what is working well, what is working not so well, and, in the case of the latter, identifying what steps and interventions we need to put in place to tackle all forms of poverty and disadvantage.

I share the concern that has been expressed about what the latest statistics tell us about poverty levels in Scotland and in the UK as a whole. It is absolutely right that any Government are held properly to account for the effectiveness of their policies in tackling poverty and disadvantage. Underpinning this Government's commitment to tackling all forms of poverty is our firm conviction that delivering a sustainable long-term solution means building a strong economy and having in place a benefits system that works with the tax system and the labour market to support employment and higher pay. We believe that this is the best way to achieve better long-term outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children. We are proud, as a Government, of the progress we have made. We now have a record-breaking labour market with over 3.6 million more people in work across the UK compared with 2010. Unemployment is at its lowest rate since the 1970s, having fallen by more than half since 2010.

We are also delivering on our promise to get more people into work in Scotland. Since 2010, employment in Scotland has risen by about 250,000, with unemployment down by 126,000. In fact, Scotland has a lower rate of unemployment, at 3.3%, than the UK national average of 3.9%. Wages are now outstripping inflation—in fact, they are rising at the joint fastest rate in a decade—and about three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work, which evidence shows substantially reduces the risk of poverty.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for the excellent points that he is making. No debate on this subject would be comprehensive without referring to the fact that people with disability are affected more than anyone else in relation to poverty. What more can be done to get people with disability into work and to make sure that they do not fall foul of the benefits system, and certainly do not have to struggle with the benefits system for access to support that they deserve and that the most vulnerable people in society should have?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we do not want anybody, particularly those with a disability, to struggle in accessing our welfare system. I can assure her that I will be working very closely alongside my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work to ensure that our welfare system does deliver in that regard.

Chris Stephens: As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I welcome the Minister to his post. We look forward to questioning him in his current role. If, as he has said, the economy is so strong and wages are so great at the moment, that surely tells us that food prices, and fuel prices, are rising higher than wages. Is that the case, or is he suggesting that food poverty exists for another reason?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I look forward to appearing before the Work and Pensions Committee in due course, and I hope that our relationship will be robust and, no doubt, critically constructive. He raises some good points. I have already set aside time to meet the Scottish National party's spokesman on these issues, and I also look forward to sitting down with the hon. Gentleman to look at them.

A working-age adult living in a household where every adult is working is about six times less likely to be in relative poverty than one living in a household where nobody works. A child living in a household where every adult is working is about five times less likely to be in relative poverty than a child in a household where nobody works. There is only a 7% chance of a child being in relative poverty if both parents work full time, compared with 66% for two-parent families with only part-time work. We will continue to reform our welfare system, so that it promotes work as the most effective route out of poverty and is fairer to those who receive it and to the taxpayers who pay for it.

Universal credit is, of course, at the heart of these reforms and will help tackle poverty by helping an extra 200,000 people into work. It is a modern benefit with one monthly payment that adjusts to earnings, avoiding the cliff edges associated with the legacy benefits that it replaces. It will also be £2 billion a year more generous than the previous system. A number of Members across

the House have raised concerns, and as a Government we have responded to those concerns by making changes to remove waiting days and make bigger advance payments available. In the last Budget, we announced a £4.5 billion cash boost, which will make a huge difference to the lives of working families and provide extra support for people moving on to universal credit.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for that, but the problem with the advance payment is that it is very much seen as a loan. Is the Department, as it previously indicated to the Work and Pensions Committee, looking at whether the advance payment could become the first payment, which could relieve the reliance on food banks and deal with food poverty?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his further intervention. As I said, we have made improvements to the initial UC assessment period, including the removal of waiting days and advances of up to 100% of the indicative first payment. It is important to say that the advances are 100% interest-free, and people have to pay them back over 12 months; as of 2021, it will be over 16 months. However, he makes a fair point. We need to ensure that claimants are working with their coaches and are absolutely clear about what they are taking on. It is not a loan; it is an advance. We have to ensure that work coaches are advising appropriately and ensuring that options are available to the claimant. They do not have to take it all in one go, for example; they can take a small amount as per their needs at the time. I am willing to discuss that with him in further detail.

I mentioned the concerns that were raised and the changes that were made in the last Budget. In particular, we have put an extra £1.7 billion a year into work allowances, increasing the amount that hard-working families can earn before the taper is applied. That is an extra £630 a year for 2.4 million families, many of them in Scotland.

We are also working in partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland to provide a consistent UK-wide service and assist claimants to successfully make their universal credit claim. The Citizens Advice Help to Claim service offers tailored, practical support to help people make their claim and receive their first full payment on time. That service is available online, over the telephone and face to face through local Citizens Advice services. We are also working closely with the Scottish Government to help them achieve their goals on UC flexibilities. For example, UC Scottish choices are now available to all claimants in Scotland on full service who are not in receipt of a DWP alternative arrangement plan.

No one in the Government wants to see poverty increasing or reported increases in food bank use. The recent poverty statistics are, of course, disappointing. However, child poverty in Scotland has remained the same or decreased across all four of the main measures in the three years to 2017-18, compared with the three years to 2009-10. The statistics published in March this year represent a year—2017-18—when some families struggled to keep pace with rising costs, including a higher level of inflation, which the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) referred to, but since then there has been a year of real wage growth. Earnings have outpaced inflation for 13 months in a row, with real wages growing 1.6% on the year. The statistics do not reflect the substantial additional funding for our welfare

system announced in the last financial year, which are only just beginning to take effect.

Increasing the rate of employment is not, however, the limit of our ambition. The Government have gone much further than previous Governments to support working people and have set out their ambition in the Chancellor's spring statement to end low pay across the UK. UC works alongside other policies introduced by this Government to promote full-time employment as a way out of poverty and towards financial independence. In particular, it offers smooth incentives for people to increase their hours, and we are confident that as UC reaches more working families we will see more working full time.

Our national living wage, which is among the highest in the world, is expected to benefit more than 1.7 million people; and the increase to £8.21 from April this year will increase a full-time worker's annual pay by more than £2,750 since 2016.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister makes a point about the living wage, but it is not a real living wage as defined by the Living Wage Foundation. Also, it is not available to people under the age of 25. Why does he think that a 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 or 24-year-old in the same job as a 25-year-old is not entitled to the same wage?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She has long campaigned on this issue. The national living wage that we have introduced will make a huge difference, but, referring to the wider point of poverty, I want to be clear that it is not just a Department for Work and Pensions issue. As part of my role, I want to work across the Government with my counterparts in other Departments—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Treasury and the Department of Health and Social Care—to tackle poverty in all its forms. We all have a part to play. I hear what she has to say, and I am happy to meet her at a later stage to discuss that issue at more length.

Hugh Gaffney: The Minister says that he will end low pay and increase the living wage. Will he end zero-hours contracts?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The answer is no, because zero-hours contracts work for a large number of people. I have spoken to people in my constituency who find huge benefit in zero-hours contracts. They give them the flexibility that they need in the work place.

Our tax changes will make basic rate taxpayers more than £1,200 better off from April, compared with 2010. Taken together, the most recent changes mean that a single person on the national living wage will, from April, take home over £13,700 a year—£4,500 more than in 2009-10. The Government remain committed to providing a strong safety net for those who need it. This is why we continue to spend more than £95 billion a year on welfare benefits for people of working age. I would say gently to the hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members that the Scottish Government can tackle poverty in all its forms through its devolved skills, education, health and employment programmes such as those introduced to support disadvantaged pupils within the education system. The UK Government

[Will Quince]

have also taken similar steps to support the most vulnerable by providing free school meals and our healthy start vouchers. We are also investing up to £26 million in school breakfast clubs and £9 million to provide meals and activities for thousands of disadvantaged children during the summer holidays.

We have also heard from the hon. Gentleman about the impact of food insecurity on health. The UK Government are taking action. For example, chapter 2 of the childhood obesity strategy announces a bold ambition to halve childhood obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030. I will ensure that my counterpart in the Department of Health and Social Care is aware of some of the wider issues that have been raised in this debate. The Government also want to build a better understanding of food insecurity.

Jim Shannon: I recently met a representative of a lobby group that, along with Sainsbury's, is carrying out a project in a number of communities that involves schools, better eating and more careful eating. It is intended to address obesity and to involve young people of five to 15 in activities during the summer months. A great many people out there are doing great things, and sometimes we need to recognise them.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman is right: we should learn from things that are being done really well across the country and seek to share that best practice. I join him in thanking the organisations that make such a big difference.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Will Quince: One moment.

As I said, the Government also want to build a better understanding of household food needs, to ensure that we are targeting support at those who need it most. That is why we have worked with the Scottish Government, food insecurity experts and the Office for National Statistics to introduce a new set of food security questions in the family resources survey, starting from April 2019. In future, we will be able to monitor the prevalence and severity of household food insecurity across the UK,

and for specific groups, better to understand the drivers of food insecurity and identify which groups are most at risk.

The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill also spoke about the recent trends in food bank use. I reassure the House that I am very much alive to the issue. I have already had an introductory conversation with the chief executive of the Trussell Trust, and I plan to visit a number of food banks to understand more about the experiences of food bank users. I echo comments made by hon. Members thanking volunteers across our country and those who donate to food banks.

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Will Quince: I want to finish on food banks. My Department is also exploring whether, building on existing good practice, working more closely with food banks can help us to identify and better support any customers who may, for a variety of reasons, not be receiving the full formal support to which they are entitled.

I want to come back on two comments made during this debate. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) asked about those with no recourse to public funds. I hear her point. Those people and how they are supported is a matter for the Home Office, but I will take her point away and have that conversation with my Home Office counterpart.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned pensioner poverty. The percentage of pensioners living in poverty has fallen dramatically over several decades. Relative poverty among pensioners has halved since 1990. The Government will be spending £121.5 billion on benefits for pensioners this year, including £97 billion on the state pension. We are absolutely committed to the triple lock for the rest of this Parliament.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm our view that the long-term approach that we are taking is the right one if we are to deliver lasting change. However, we are not complacent: this is an area of real focus for me and the Department. I look forward to working with colleagues from across the House, the devolved Administrations and charities to tackle poverty in all its forms.

Question put and agreed to.

8.42 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 7 May 2019

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

Women Human Rights Defenders

11.30 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered celebrating the work of women human rights defenders globally.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate, and I am grateful to the hon. Members who co-sponsored its application. It is fantastic to have support from six other political parties that are also committed to defending the human rights of women across the globe.

This House recognises and celebrates the contribution of women around the world to promote and protect human rights, the rights of individual women, their families and their communities. The Government need to be fully behind that, which I hope the Minister will confirm.

As we celebrate the centenary of women's suffrage in the UK, we are reminded that suffragists and suffragettes were the forerunners of modern-day women human rights defenders. Thanks to them, we secured equal voting rights, the right to stand for parliament, the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, which are rights and freedoms that we all too often take for granted.

Women human rights defenders are at the forefront of the battle for human rights globally. From India and South Africa, where thousands have taken to the streets to protest against endemic sexual violence, to Saudi Arabia and Iran, where women activists risk arrest to resist the driving ban and forced hijab; from Ecuador, where Amazonian women face reprisals for trying to protect the rainforest, to Colombia, where women are demanding inclusion in the political process and enforcing the historic peace process; and in London, where thousands of women took to the streets last year to protest against the misogyny that is still rife throughout our society, the reality of which is sadly epitomised by the utterances of the current incumbent of the White House.

I am immensely proud of the human rights defenders in my constituency of Hornsey and Wood Green: Deborah Coles, the Director of Inquest and author of "Dying on the Inside: Examining Women's Deaths in Prison"; Samantha Smethers, the influential chief executive of the Fawcett Society; and Sajda Mughal, the director of the JAN Trust, which specialises in ethnic minority women's empowerment and families combating extremism.

Women's activism is recognised as key to development. Evidence shows that women's movements have been the most significant factor in securing legislation on violence against women around the world. The burgeoning power of women's voices cannot be overstated. We need women involved in all aspects if we are to address key challenges such as the gender pay gap and enabling women—many of whom are the heads of households—into business and,

crucially, ensuring that they keep the profits of their labour. There are some really good examples of what the Government are doing to support women who are heads of households in developing countries, where micro-loans allow women to run their own businesses, from which they get to keep the profits and look after their own families without having to share the profits with men in the household who may not share that purpose.

Women who stand up and speak out face unprecedented levels of repression and abuse in response, because of both their activism and their gender. Women human rights defenders defy societal expectations of what women should and should not do and of what spaces they should occupy. We must recognise not only the achievements of women defenders, but the grave challenges that they face for speaking out.

Next week, 15 May marks a year of detention for the women activists in Saudi Arabia who successfully led the campaign for the right to drive. While Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman took the credit for introducing that right, the very women who brought it about find themselves behind bars instead of behind the wheel. Those incredibly brave women, who have been detained for months with no charge and—as reported by Amnesty International—face torture, including sexual abuse and electric shocks, at the hands of the authorities, have paid high prices for their peaceful actions to realise the rights of all women in Saudi Arabia.

Like the suffragettes in the UK, who were women from all walks of life, women human rights defenders are ordinary people doing extraordinary work. They could be farmers, doctors, nurses, teachers, lawyers, journalists, or families of victims. They work in their communities to push for progress, defend people and their rights, and stand up to tyranny. Marielle Franco, who campaigned tirelessly in support of minority rights and against police brutality in Brazil was, tragically, murdered in March 2018. Azza Soliman is a lawyer who, for many years, supported women who experienced domestic and sexual violence in Egypt. She was arrested, banned from travelling, had her assets frozen and was accused of dishonouring the nation for speaking the truth on the violence that women face. I note, in that particular circumstance, the combination of silencing a woman and freezing her assets. We must recognise that having access to funds often allows women to speak out. Vitalina Koval, an LGBTI rights activist in Ukraine, was physically attacked for organising Pride marches.

Women human rights defenders drive change in their communities, but are under attack, and face imprisonment, travel bans, restrictions on funding, reprisals against their families, surveillance, smear campaigns and even enforced disappearances, death sentences, extrajudicial executions and murder. All around the world, women are fighting for progress and refuse to be silenced, whatever the cost. They are on the frontline as critical agents of change in their communities and countries, and must be recognised and celebrated as such. They need more than just our words; they need action. They need the international community to call for their release when they are imprisoned, to offer protection when they are threatened, to demand justice when impunity prevails, to fund them when they are impoverished, and, above all, to listen to them when others wish to silence them.

[*Catherine West*]

The UK should be at the forefront of the response to that global backlash, not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it is the sensible thing to do. Women and other defenders on the ground can deliver change on media freedom, modern slavery, the rule of law and other UK Government priorities. We must recognise that in our globalised world, we are all connected—the unnoticed restrictions and abuses of those who speak out somewhere else today can happen here tomorrow.

As women in this House know, women who raise their voices in this country can also face a backlash. Online harassment and abuse of women, particularly on social media platforms, is rampant. Amnesty has shown that a woman receives a toxic tweet on Twitter every 30 seconds, and women from ethnic, religious and sexual identity minorities are even likelier to receive abuse. The same study reveals that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) receives over a third of such abuse. She shattered the glass ceiling for black and minority ethnic women in 1987 and, over thirty years later, she is bombarded hourly with the most horrific racist and misogynist abuse.

We in the UK cannot ignore what is happening around the world. We must challenge what happens, whether in Egypt, Ukraine, Brazil or Saudi Arabia, in the knowledge that we are not only supporting the voices of change there, but protecting the voices of change everywhere.

Will the Minister confirm his Department's commitment to promote and protect women human rights defenders globally, in recognition of the unprecedented surge in attacks against them? That should start with a new strategy to support and protect human rights defenders—I am surprised that such a strategy does not already exist, but today is an opportunity to start that process—and ensure that women human rights defenders are given particular consideration, in recognition of all that they do in the UK and in every country around the world.

11.39 am

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Evans. Women human rights defenders are on the frontline of achieving positive change around the world. From #MeToo to #TimesUp, women are pushing back against hundreds of years of misogyny and oppression.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, I will highlight the role of women human rights defenders in West Papua. They are mainly women from outside West Papua, due to the fact that the stories of women rights defenders in West Papua are still hidden because of the oppression that they face daily.

I want to talk about Jenny Munro of the University of Queensland and her work on the subjugation of and violence directed against Papuan women street sex workers in highlands Papua, in particular by the Indonesian military. Her work describes co-ordination between the health sector and the military to force women to undergo HIV testing and medical treatment irrespective of the need for such medical interventions. Jenny's work also describes some of the living conditions of young women who end up doing street sex work as the result of complicated social circumstances, as happens elsewhere in the world, and it highlights the experience of women who return home to Papua after testing positive for HIV.

West Papua faces the highest prevalence of HIV in Indonesia—admitted by the Indonesian Ministry of Health in 2014—and is the only part of Indonesia to be experiencing a generalised epidemic. In 2013, HIV prevalence among indigenous Papuans was officially estimated at 2.9%, while the prevalence among non-indigenous migrants was 0.4%. Health officials estimate that just one in five cases of HIV have been detected, and fewer than one in 10 of those people receive treatment. HIV prevalence is highest among youth aged 15 to 24 and among Papuans living in remote and rural areas. The prevalence of HIV among pregnant women, detected during antenatal screening, ranged from 2% to 6%, a much higher percentage. The data suggest that West Papuans face the most rapid increase in HIV prevalence anywhere in the world.

Similar to men diagnosed with HIV, the women in West Papua experience stigma and ostracism at the community level. However, because women's position is more precarious to begin with, due to patriarchal values in which women overall are subordinate to male standards of behaviour, they are more likely than men to end up ostracised from their communities. That leads to a complicated management of secrets in order to remain within a supportive family network. Jenny Munro has also done some excellent recent work on young Papuan women who leave West Papua to study outside the province, and on the challenges that they face to complete their education when confronted by discrimination on the lines of gender and race—Papuans are Melanesians, rather than having the same ethnic origins as other Indonesians.

I raise this issue because, without Jenny's work as a human rights defender, the systemic oppression and exploitation of West Papuan women would be hidden, and the extent of the utilisation of West Papuans by the Indonesian military and the high price in terms of their health and wellbeing would be kept secret. We would otherwise never know what was happening to women in West Papua—being forced into the sex trade to have unprotected sex, often contracting HIV.

Jenny is one of those people who work in an area of oppression or occupation where local conditions are so degraded that it needs women from the rest of the world to speak up for it and to give the people their voice, so that they can be heard here. This is the first time that any Parliament has heard about that particular aspect of the West Papuan occupation, and that is down to Jenny's work, of which I was made aware in the weeks leading up to this debate.

I call on the Minister to do more to support women human rights defenders in West Papua and in other occupied territories. The sustainable development goals recognise the vital role of human rights defenders, including women, in contributing to progress. The Minister could do more to support women human rights defenders campaigning on the HIV/AIDS epidemic in West Papua and its causes under sustainable development goals 3 on good health and wellbeing, 5 on gender equality, 8 on inclusive growth and decent work, 10 on reducing inequality and 16 on access to justice. I will not labour the point, because tomorrow we have a debate in this Chamber on human rights in West Papua and I will use that opportunity to expand on how I see the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's role in safeguarding human rights in West Papua.

11.44 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I thank my constituents who wrote to me about the issue and encouraged me to come along to make a contribution. For them, it is very important for the human rights of women to be defended, particularly those of women trying to defend and protect other women. The UK Government must do all within their power to take action to protect those women and to ensure that all those countries with which the UK has diplomatic contact are left under no illusion as to the UK's position on the matter. I am sure that the Minister will respond to some of that in his speech later.

It is easy for me as a woman to stand in this place. It is relatively easy for women in this country to stand up and give voice on whatever societal ills they wish to speak up about. However, when I come into this building, I am acutely aware that many women around the world do not have that level of privilege—nowhere near it. In many countries, for people to speak out can be to sign their own death warrant, or to lose everything they hold dear. The risks of doing so are incredibly profound. Women are not able to speak out in that way without risking their families and homes.

I encourage the Minister to speak out, particularly to those regimes that are often found wanting on human rights, especially Saudi Arabia, which has not done nearly enough to change its behaviour. The most recent executions did not involve women, but they were of people who could not defend themselves properly under that regime. Where we see persecution of men, persecution of women will be doubled or trebled in severity, because women there do not even get the chance to speak out.

As the Minister knows, I have some involvement in Yemen through the all-party group on Yemen. Recently, I was pleased to meet some women campaigners who visited London. They were able to tell me more about their situation and how difficult it was to tell their stories, or even to get out of Yemen to come here and give us their testimony. It seems a lot easier for men to get to London and to make representations to groups or in front of Ministers, but if women's voices are not heard—if women cannot even get out of their countries to give their testimony—their stories will not be told, and we will not hear about the disproportionate impact on women.

The World Economic Forum studied 146 countries and found that, of all of them, women in Yemen came last. They had among the worst circumstances in the world, and the war in Yemen over the past few years has only made that worse. In such situations, women seem to make more sacrifices than men—the cause of women and girls' education in Yemen has gone backwards, as women are married off younger in order to get a bit of security for their families and their own lives.

Women in Yemen are compromised not only in education but in health services, because they cannot access such services without a male relative or because those services have been lost in the war—attacked in air strikes—and it is not safe for women to get to the hospitals, let alone to get the treatment they so desperately need. As for women working in those services, many civil servants in Yemen have not been paid for a considerable time, so the women cannot work to bring money into their families. They therefore cannot defend other women who desperately need health services, particularly for maternal health.

When talking about women's voices, I ask the Minister to consider who is around the table in his meetings when he goes to and engages with other countries. Are women allowed to go to such meetings? Are they allowed to give voice to the issues that they might wish to raise? Are they able to give a full account, or are they being screened away by the men with the power? Will he consider that in relation to his meetings and the groups he is meeting? Where are the women in such conversations, and are they present and able to give voice to their concerns?

I also want to remark on women in this country who have come from other countries to claim asylum. In my casework, I encounter women who have been trafficked or come here under some kind of coercion—I can think of one woman who came here as a married woman but came out as gay when she got here, because it felt safer here—but all such things are often counted against them in the immigration process and in their asylum interviews. I sat in on that particular woman's asylum interview, and the Home Office official said, "Well, you lied about your sexuality to your husband, so you must be lying here today. How can we say that you are not?" Women need to be believed—their stories and testimonies must be believed. In a lot of circumstances, for a woman to be able to tell her story, she has come through a hell of a lot to get there in the first place. Telling that story in front of her husband, her children or whoever it happens to be—in front of a male person from the Home Office—can be incredibly traumatic. A lot of the women I see in my surgery have not been believed but should be. I believe them very much when they tell me their stories.

I would like the Minister to pass on to his Home Office colleagues that when women have been trafficked to this country in difficult circumstances, we should do everything in our power to make sure that they have sanctuary and safety here, even if they could not feel safe in the country they came from.

11.50 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for securing this important debate on women's work to defend human rights globally, and for pointing out, in her well-informed and comprehensive speech, the importance of the path set by the suffragettes in the UK to secure votes for women.

In the spirit of celebrating human rights defenders, as this debate seeks to do, I want to pay tribute to the fact that across the world, as we have heard, ordinary women commit acts of great self-sacrifice in the face of persistent abuse, threats to personal safety, persecution and violence, simply for standing up for what is right. All of us who believe in human rights, certainly in all western democracies, have a duty to stand shoulder to shoulder with those women and do all we can to support them. All states that believe in freedom should use every diplomatic means and avenue at their disposal to secure human rights for all—no ifs, no buts.

We should support all women who stand up for human rights in countries where women are seen as mere chattels—the legal property of their closest male relatives—such as in Saudi Arabia. Women all around the world are denied their basic human rights simply because they are women. We need to talk about that and learn more

[*Patricia Gibson*]

about it. I learned much from listening to the speech by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) about the situation in West Papua.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green referred to the appalling situation in Saudi Arabia. So-called wrongdoing in such regimes, such as women's campaigning to be permitted to learn to drive, is sufficient to put one's life in danger. We who believe in freedom must have the courage to stand up to those regimes and to support women, instead of turning a blind eye. We talk much in the west about the contribution of women in western societies, but we betray the women living under misogynistic regimes—such regimes are misogynistic, as the hon. Member for Leeds North West pointed out—where women have much lower status than men. We betray those women by staying silent about their plight.

We all welcome the recent decision of the Saudi regime to allow women to drive. According to some folk in Saudi, the lifting of the ban is controversial since they believe that it will lead to women becoming promiscuous. But we need to remember what we heard from the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green: in the month before the ban was lifted last year, more than a dozen female activists who had campaigned for the right to drive were rounded up and put in jail. At least nine of them remain in prison. The families of the activists say that they have been tortured and put in solitary confinement for long periods. No formal charges have been brought against the women, only a series of allegations of their having been involved in a foreign plot against the Government.

It has been pointed out to me—and to many of us, I am sure—that we should have a care for cultural sensitivities. I am sure that we are all in favour of being mindful of cultural sensitivities, but we must not be complicit with our silence about a regime that believes that women are not equal to men in any sense. They are not allowed to go out unless they are accompanied by their male owners, and they can be cruelly treated and imprisoned for having the temerity to hope to be seen as individuals in their own right, rather than the possession of a man. We must not be silent about that in the name of cultural sensitivities. When we are silent in the face of others being repressed, we become a friend of the oppressor, or perhaps even a useful idiot for the oppressor if we continue relations with that state as though it were not a tyrannical regime. That simply will not do.

There is deep concern about reports of the torture and ill treatment of detained women's rights defenders in Saudi Arabia. They have been imprisoned since mid-2018 solely for peacefully campaigning for the protection and promotion of human rights, including women's rights. Some were detained incommunicado, with no access to their families or lawyers during the first three months of their detention, and were subjected to chilling smear campaigns by state media. They all remain without access to legal representation.

Recent reports have emerged that some of the detained women activists have been subjected to electric shocks, flogging, sexual threats and other forms of torture. Testimonies recount that the abuse has left some of the women unable to walk or stand properly, with uncontrolled shaking and marks on their bodies. At least one of them

has attempted suicide on several occasions. Those women have long been advocating for Saudi women's right to drive, have called for an end to the discriminatory male guardianship system and have peacefully campaigned for greater respect for human rights. For that, they risk being tried and sentenced before the specialised criminal court, the country's counter-terrorism court.

In 2016 the United Nations Committee Against Torture, in its second periodic report on Saudi Arabia, expressed concern at the application of terrorism legislation through the specialised criminal court, which enables the criminalisation of acts of peaceful expression considered as “endangering national unity” or “undermining the reputation or position of the State”.

Those regulations have been used to try human rights defenders for exercising their fundamental rights. They violate international standards for the right to a fair trial and have enabled the authorities to detain individuals without providing them with access to legal representation during the investigation phase.

The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women further recommended in March 2018 that the Saudi state should facilitate women's access to justice and institutionalise legal aid that is accessible, sustainable and responsive to the needs of women. If it were not so serious, it would be laughable that Saudi Arabia is a member of the UN Human Rights Council. As such, it is obligated to uphold the highest standards for the promotion and protection of human rights, and to co-operate fully with the Council's mechanisms. However, the Saudi Government have been largely unco-operative with the Council and continue to exhibit a flagrant disregard for fundamental freedoms.

My concern is that the international community seeks to stay on good terms with this rich and powerful regime at any cost, and the Saudi Prince knows that. Where is the motivation for Saudi Arabia to care about international opinion? I urge the Minister and the UK Government to lead attempts to bring pressure to bear on the Saudi Government to persuade them that their action is simply incompatible with civilised, modern codes of behaviour. Halting UK arms sales to a country that deals in terror, killing and oppression would be a good start. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), that would immediately benefit the people of Yemen.

It is worth noting that the Saudi Government require visiting reporters to be accompanied by a Government minder. That really says it all. I want to challenge the UK Minister to urge the UK Government to lead support for all women human rights defenders in the international community, as pointed out by the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central pointed out, our constituents really care about these matters.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise for being late—my plane was delayed and I ran the whole way here, so I am still catching my breath. Women have been at the forefront of the defence of human rights for many years, such as Maud Kells from Northern Ireland, who has spent 50 years providing maternity care for Congolese women, even after she was shot by a bandit while in the missionary hospital she helped to found. Women like her deserve recognition and the utmost respect. That is what this debate is all about: giving women the recognition that they rightly deserve.

Patricia Gibson: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is amazing that such women are ordinary women, who are doing extraordinary things in some of the most barbaric conditions and regimes.

Women human rights defenders not only face the challenges and attacks suffered by male human rights defenders, but suffer more due to the historical and structural inequalities in power relations and discrimination. They suffer heightened risks and acts of violence because of their gender and the specific, often marginalised, human rights issues they work on. For example, women human rights defenders are more likely to experience sexualised smear campaigns, sexual assault and rape, including at police stations. Targeting of their children also takes place. There is also sometimes marginalisation within their own movements and communities, which must be extremely difficult to bear.

That is why this debate is important. We cannot forget—we must not forget—the struggles and risks faced by women human rights defenders. They stand up to repression, barbarity and cruelty every single day, risking everything to have the kinds of rights and freedoms that we in the west take for granted. They must not be forgotten, no matter how rich, powerful or important the state perpetrating the oppression happens to be. It is right that we celebrate them, salute their courage and stand beside them in their struggle. I look forward to hearing how the Minister intends to put the UK at the forefront of those efforts.

12 noon

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for bringing this important debate to the House and for her comprehensive introduction to the subject. She gave a thorough guide to women's activism worldwide and at home—from women campaigning against a Saudi driving ban, to the protests against the utterances of the incumbent of the White House. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson)—they are a small but select group, as might be expected at this time of day following a break. No Westminster Hall debate would be complete without an intervention from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I thank him for that.

As we have heard, women human rights defenders around the world work tirelessly to challenge violence against women, to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights, and to create economic justice for women. While women doing that work face the same threats as other human rights defenders, including surveillance, false charges and violence, they also face, as I think every Member has said, threats due to their gender.

Women human rights defenders encounter intensified threats when their work challenges male dominance in society. Michel Forst, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, highlighted that when he presented his report to the Human Rights Council. He said:

“In the current political climate, in which there is a backlash against human rights, women who defend and promote rights are often the first to come under attack”.

His report shows how the rise in misogynistic, sexist and homophobic speech by political leaders in recent years has normalised violence against women human rights defenders. In some cases, those acting on behalf of states have engaged in direct attacks against women defenders and their families.

The special rapporteur's report said:

“In many countries, women who dare to speak out for human rights are stigmatised and called bad mothers, terrorists or witches, silenced and marginalised from decision making and can even be killed. It is particularly worrying that the hostility they face comes not only from state authorities, but also the media, social movements, their own communities and even their family...Public shaming, attacks on women's honour and their reputation...publishing their personal details on the internet, sexual violence and attacks against their children and loved ones are used to silence women human rights defenders”.

The report notes that women face the same risks as men defending human rights, but it makes it clear that women defenders face additional and different threats that are shaped by entrenched gender stereotypes and ingrained social perceptions of women. The special rapporteur stated:

“We have documented how the obstacles and risks faced by women human rights defenders are shaped by their gender. Women are attacked for promoting and protecting human rights simply because of their identity as women and because of what they do”.

The report raises alarm about the increasing number of states that have been restricting civil society space and imposing legal and administrative requirements that curtail the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, association and peaceful assembly. In some countries, women's rights defenders have been targeted for promoting women's human rights, including the right to equality and to sexual and reproductive health.

The special rapporteur expressed serious concern at the increasing use of the concept of gender ideology, which is presented in various parts of the world, and especially in Latin America and eastern Europe, as an attempt by feminists and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights defenders to destabilise the social and political order. He stressed:

“There are no short cuts to reversing this deplorable situation. We must dismantle harmful gender stereotypes and radically reimagine social constructs of gender to prevent the domination and marginalisation of women...States and international organisations must recognise the specific challenges and risks women defenders face. They must ensure that such defenders are recognised, supported and enabled to participate equally, meaningfully and powerfully in the promotion and protection of human rights”.

It is also important to mention UN Security Council resolution 1325, which highlights the importance of women's voices and involvement in achieving and keeping peace. In 2000, the Security Council formally acknowledged through the creation of resolution 1325 the changing nature of warfare, with civilians increasingly targeted and women continuing to be excluded from participation in peace processes. The resolution specifically addresses how women and girls are differentially impacted by conflict and war and recognises the critical role that women can and already do play in peacebuilding efforts. It affirms that peace and security efforts are more sustainable when women are equal partners in preventing violent conflict, delivering relief and recovery efforts, and forging lasting peace.

Each of the resolution's mandates relates to one of the four basic pillars of participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery. Participation calls for increased

[Liz McInnes]

participation of women at all levels of decision making, including in national, regional and international institutions; in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict; in peace negotiations; in peace operations, as soldiers, police, and civilians; and as special representatives of the UN Secretary-General. Protection calls specifically for the protection of women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence, including in emergency and humanitarian situations such as refugee camps. Prevention calls for improving intervention strategies in the prevention of violence against women, including by prosecuting those responsible for violations of international law, strengthening women's rights under national law, and supporting local women's peace initiatives and conflict resolution processes. Relief and recovery calls for the advancement of relief and recovery measures to address international crises through a gendered lens, including by respecting the civilian and humanitarian nature of refugee camps and considering the needs of women and girls in the design of refugee camps and settlements.

ActionAid UK has demanded that Governments and donors urgently scale up efforts and resources to support the leadership of women human rights defenders and to protect their rights, and cease to condone the rise in violence, whether through harmful action or no action at all. It asks the UK Government to recognise, champion and prioritise women human rights defenders and to support and increase resources to protect the rights of civil society, including women's rights organisations and defenders.

The UK Government should defend those rights and hold Governments and other powerful actors to account, and they should actively resist and challenge reversals of women's sexual and reproductive health rights by Governments within the UN and other key global policy forums. They should introduce mandatory gender-sensitive human rights due diligence for UK companies to ensure that they identify, prevent and mitigate rights violations in their supply chains and linked to their activities, including against women human rights defenders who are challenging abuse. They should also permit access to effective remedy, in line with UN guidelines on business and human rights.

Amnesty International has asked the UK Government to hold meaningful consultations with women human rights defenders in the development of their foreign policy and development programmes. Importantly, we should recognise the vital role of defenders in contributing to progress on the sustainable development goals, especially goal 5 on gender equality and goal 16 on access to justice. I fully support those asks of the UK Government, and would be interested to hear the Minister's view on that.

In December last year, Lord Ahmad announced at an event to mark Human Rights Day that Foreign and Commonwealth Office internal guidance on supporting human rights defenders would be made public, which is welcome. Will the Minister confirm when that guidance will be made public, as promised in December last year?

In conclusion, if we want to make the world better for women and girls, we must acknowledge and celebrate those who defend women's human rights every day. We must defend the defenders.

12.12 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for securing this important debate. She mentioned the scourge of the misuse of social media and the internet, and a further report by Amnesty International identifies that those most at risk of being abused on social media—whether Twitter, Facebook or elsewhere—tend to be women, because it is used as a way of trying to silence them. We heard about the unacceptable situation faced by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). She is by no means unique, but the sheer volume of that abuse could be the focus of a further long debate. We all have concerns about the idea of regulating, or introducing too much compliance to, the internet, and we believe that free speech is an element of a free society, but, equally, the shocking level of abuse has, unfortunately, cautioned so much political debate, and it will continue to do so unless some sort of code—whether voluntary or otherwise—is introduced. That is probably an issue for further debate, but it reflects the challenges faced by human rights defenders, especially women.

I am grateful for the contributions by other hon. Members, who eloquently described the impact of women human rights defenders locally, nationally and internationally, and I will begin with a quote from a human rights defender that goes to the heart of this debate. Sara Landeros is one of a number of women human rights defenders the Foreign and Commonwealth Office profiled on social media last year to mark the 20th anniversary of the UN declaration on human rights defenders and to give them a platform to talk about their work. Ms Landeros's organisation provides legal representation for persecuted human rights defenders in Mexico. She said:

"As a defender, you don't have the right to give up. When you are defending victims, you have to be strong. If they, as victims, have not stopped, then you have to keep going too, for them."

That kind of selfless commitment and dedication lies behind everything that human rights defenders do day in, day out, as they work tirelessly to defend the rights of others who are often voiceless in society.

Human rights defenders often operate in the most difficult environments, and by exposing issues that the powerful would prefer to keep hidden, their work puts them in constant danger. They or their families could face discrimination, violence or, at the very worst, death. That is what happened to Berta Cáceres, who bravely stood up for the rights of an indigenous group in Honduras against a proposed hydroelectric dam project. She paid for that with her life, and it has taken five years for those responsible to be held to account. Tragically, Berta's murder is by no means unique, and many others have been killed for standing up to those in power. Many others face similar threats.

In some cases, the threats that women face are the same as those faced by their male counterparts, including surveillance, false accusations and physical arrest. For example—this was raised by the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Hornsey and Wood Green—we are deeply concerned about Saudi women activists who have been detained. The British Government, including the Prime Minister, have lobbied consistently on behalf of women human

rights defenders who are currently in detention in Saudi Arabia, and asked for them to be given due process, for allegations of torture to be properly, fully, publicly and independently investigated, and for those responsible for any alleged abuse to be prosecuted. British Embassy officials have continued to request to observe each and every trial session and have unfailingly, quietly behind the scenes, advocated the importance of the right to freedom of speech and a fair trial. Sadly, however, many of those women remain in jail facing unclear charges.

Women are also exposed to particular risks by virtue of being women. Those range from sexual abuse and harassment—several Members have raised that issue—to domestic abuse and hostility in the workplace. In such circumstances, it takes even more courage, strength and resilience to stand up to the powerful.

Catherine West: What is the proposed action if Saudi Arabia does not comply with the discussions through the back channels? Such discussions are correct and part of diplomacy, but we are facing a crisis. What could be done differently to promote a just solution for not just women but all those facing human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia—a country with which we do so much business?

Mark Field: If I may, I will say a little more about that later. I hope the hon. Lady will appreciate that the Floor of the Chamber is probably not the right place for me to make up policy on the hoof, but there are clearly grave concerns, and perhaps I can write to her in due course to explain some of the steps we intend to take in that regard.

We are all proud of those women who stand up day after day, proving time and again that their words and work have a real impact in righting wrongs and creating a more equal and just society. It is therefore right to honour them in this debate, and the Government—indeed, I am sure, all Members of the House—unequivocally support them.

Protecting and promoting human rights is a cornerstone of our work in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, although it often means engaging in difficult conversations, both publicly and privately, with a variety of Governments with whom we have strong diplomatic relationships. We are fortunate to work with and support courageous women, such as Rebeca Gyumi, who succeeded in raising the legal age of marriage for boys and girls in Tanzania. In recognition for her work, she was awarded the UN human rights prize. She is still hard at work in Tanzania and working with the British high commission there.

In Jakarta, Indonesia, we used our Chevening alumni programme fund to raise awareness among young people about sexual harassment. The project implementer is a former Chevening scholar, who is now a prominent human rights defender and lawyer focusing particularly on gender and equality. She and tens of thousands of other women human rights defenders around the world dedicate their time, efforts and energy to helping others; they deserve our gratitude and support.

Throughout 2019, the UK will increase the transparency of our support for such human rights champions. We will work with like-minded partners—Governments, NGOs and others—around the globe to support and uphold human rights.

Patricia Gibson: We all have concerns about how Saudi Arabia treats women and human rights defenders. Given that we are aware of the barbarity of the Saudi regime—notably, that it appears to have no qualms about bombing innocent civilians in Yemen—is the Minister comfortable with the UK continuing to sell arms to such a blood-thirsty regime?

Mark Field: The situation in Yemen is far more complicated than the hon. Lady puts it. I could rehearse the issues that have resulted in the civil war in Yemen. As she is aware, there are the most rigorous arms control codes in place, which have been adhered to by all UK Governments for the last 20 years. All Ministers take the issue extremely seriously. I can assure her that there are opportunities, challenges and responsibilities in signing off any arms sales, and there are strict criteria, in UK and international law, to which we adhere.

I have talked about our bilateral work, but we also work multilaterally through the UN. The UK is working with partners to strengthen the resolve of the international community to support women human rights defenders. A year ago, we committed £1.6 million to support efforts to get more women participating in peace processes, as mediators and peace builders, across the Commonwealth. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) is right that that is an important part of the process. The UN is continually aware of the issue through Security Council resolution 1325. It is trying to raise interest across the globe and to create female advocates, who will make a real difference.

Working with partners means continuing to work with the many thousands of non-governmental organisations that share our human rights values and objectives, a number of whom have been referred to during the debate. They are the experts; it is their expertise and passion, alongside that of Governments, that helps to deliver change. They also support the human rights defenders on the frontline of human rights.

We are actively supporting women's political participation because we recognise that political empowerment gives women the opportunity to share their views, to challenge the status quo and to make informed decisions. That is why women's empowerment is at the heart of the Department for International Development's latest "Strategic Vision for Gender Equality", which was launched last year. That strategic vision aims to build gender equality from the ground up through the education, employment and empowerment of women and girls, including in conflict, crises and humanitarian emergencies.

Let me touch on the specific points that were brought up in the debate. I hope Members will forgive me if I do not fully answer all of them, and I will respond in writing if necessary. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green asked when the Government intend to publish the UK guidelines on working with human rights defenders. The guidelines are an internal document to help diplomatic staff in our embassies and high commissions to support human rights defenders. We have worked with NGOs to update the guidelines, and Lord Ahmad agreed in December to make UK support for human rights defenders more transparent. We intend to publish a document setting out UK support for human rights defenders in 2019, in consultation with NGOs. We hope to have something published within the next few months, but I am sure the hon. Member for

[Mark Field]

Heywood and Middleton will remind me about it later in the year if we have not had a final publication. We will be as transparent as we can be, but Members will appreciate that parts of the toolkit involve sensitive discussion, and it would not be wise to publish the rules and regulations in their entirety.

I will be facing the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) again tomorrow, at the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) about West Papua. I know the subject is close to the hon. Gentleman's heart, and I would not wish to belittle it; he has been passionate about it since his pre-parliamentary days, as he has made clear. I hope that debate will give us the opportunity to cover the situation in depth. He made some powerful points about particular female human rights defenders in West Papua.

I must confess that I have nothing specific to say in response to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I think she recognised that her concerns were more of an issue for the Home Office, so I will pass them on to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration and try to get that sorted out. On a personal note, the hon. Lady may be aware that one of my great British political heroes is Andrew Bonar Law, who was the Member for Glasgow Central in the days when it was a safe Conservative seat—I think the business folk had something to do with that. Ironically, during his time in the House, just over 100 years ago, the great debate was about women's rights to vote. He was quite a liberal on that matter, although he went on to be a Conservative Prime Minister. I think he would have been proud that the hon. Lady is the first female Member of Parliament—the first of many, I am sure—for that historic seat in the centre of that great Scottish city.

I promised the hon. Members for Hornsey and Wood Green and for North Ayrshire and Arran that I would mention Saudi Arabia, and I will write to them if there are more specific points I can address. They asked what actions the Government are taking in regard to the continued detention of women human rights defenders. We are concerned about that situation in Saudi Arabia, and we are monitoring it closely. Concerns are consistently raised by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary when they deal with the Saudi authorities at the highest level. I will make similar representations. As the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green may be aware, I am also interim Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, so I will endeavour to raise these issues in future conversations with the Saudi ambassador to London.

Concerns have also been raised through the UN. The UK was a signatory to the joint statement published at the UN Human Rights Council on 7 March, which expressed significant concerns about the situation. We are deeply concerned about the allegations of torture and have raised that directly with the Saudi authorities. Saudi Arabia remains a Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights priority country, particularly because of the death penalty, its restrictions and clampdowns on women's rights, and broader issues about freedom of expression, of assembly and of religion and belief.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton asked about business and human rights, and what we are doing to better human rights practices. We are committed to focusing on business and human rights through the

promotion of the UN guiding principles. She is quite right to identify the importance that we rightly attach to issues around sustainable development goals 5 and 16. We also wish to utilise as many diplomatic skills as we can in relation to legislative and non-legislative measures to protect against, and provide remedies for, human rights abuses by business. The UK was proud to be the first country in the world to produce a national action plan responding to the UN guiding principles on this matter. We have since encouraged other states to draft their own national action plans. We were also the first country to produce an update to that plan, in 2016. We regard those guiding principles as the authoritative global standard for preventing and addressing the risks of adverse human rights impacts on business. We will continue to promote those principles.

Thank you for giving me a little leeway on time, Mr Evans. We have had a little time on our hands, and it is fair to say that, while the debate will not fully take up its 90 minutes, there is no lack of passion from those who are here. As the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton pointed out, the debate is on the first day back after a break, when people are making their way back to London, and that has affected the quantity of debate, if not its quality.

We have heard practical examples of the ways in which women human rights defenders can and do transform lives. That is why we should all be proud that the UK remains committed to helping women all over the world to feel safe and protected in the work they do, so that they can speak freely and be part of the change we all want. I speak for not just the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but, I hope, everyone in Parliament when I say that we want a world in which all people are treated with fairness and dignity, and in which those fighting to improve human rights can do so without fear of discrimination, violence or retaliation. Let us take all our inspiration from women such as Sara Landeros. If she is determined to keep fighting on for that better world, we must do the same. The Government and, I am sure, Parliament are committed to doing that.

12.31 pm

Catherine West: I thank the Minister for what he said at the end of his speech. I am pleased about his commitment to do what he can to bring forward the internal document on supporting human rights defenders. I am also pleased that Lord Ahmed has said that there have been moves to make the approach to human rights in general more transparent, and that in-depth consultation is going on with NGOs about bringing forward the document. I know that Members of this House will be keen to see that, and perhaps even to have a debate on it at the relevant time.

I was pleased that the debate introduced two crucial issues not mentioned in my opening speech. The first was the dire situation of women with urgent health needs in West Papua. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) said, we believe that this is the first time that aspect of human rights in West Papua has had such a platform in the UK Parliament. I am pleased that we shall be able to explore it in even more depth in tomorrow's debate on West Papua.

The second issue is something emphasised by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), who is herself a role model, as a woman

shadow Minister—I note that the Government have only one woman on their Foreign Office Front-Bench team, but we live in hope that more will be appointed. There is an opportunity now, as the Minister is currently doing two jobs. Perhaps a woman could do one of them for him. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton spoke about UN Security Council resolution 1325, the importance of the picture of conflict, and how much more at risk women human rights defenders are in those conflicts. She mentioned the need to design refugee camps specially to protect women. Often it is women human rights defenders in the camps who make the case for that, in Yemen or in Libya, where there are terrible detention camps for refugees fleeing conflict in Africa.

The lives of many girls and women are phenomenally disrupted by conflict, which changes things for them very much, but out of that, occasionally, wonderful women leaders might arise, to be part of the excellent programme now being put in place by the UN under resolution 1325. That work involves promoting women in human rights as part of the peace process, and putting the case for them to be at the table, as my hon. Friend said. Then there will be women who are able to express, in a unique way, with passion and clarity, what other women face in difficult situations around the world.

I hope that we can have a further debate once the principles of the human rights picture are put forward by the FCO.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered celebrating the work of women human rights defenders globally.

12.34 pm

Sitting suspended.

Universal Credit Helpline

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): It is good to see so many hon. Members here today for the debate, which is due to begin now, on the topic of the universal credit helpline. I call Danielle Rowley to move the motion.

1 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the universal credit helpline.

Thank you very much, Mr Evans. I am very pleased that this debate has been granted and to serve under your chairship.

We so often hear in this place about the devastating impact that universal credit has on people's lives, and there is mounting evidence that those struggling to use this system are not getting the help that they need, so I think it is very important that today we discuss some of the issues and look at how we can work to resolve them.

It is the duty of the Government to support people who are struggling with universal credit, including those who, for many good and valid reasons, are not able to access the digital element of universal credit. I get in my office all the time constituents who are struggling to access the online system, for many different reasons. There might be financial barriers: they might not have a smartphone, or a computer at home, and they might not have the money to get the bus to their local jobcentre or library—indeed, those facilities may have been closed down. Those who struggle with digital access also include people with poor mental health, anxiety or disabilities; older people; people who are computer illiterate; and people with English as a second language.

I met with the Minister who is here today and I asked why the universal credit system was available only in English, because there are Syrian refugees in Midlothian who have struggled with the system, as English is not their first language. The Minister reassured me that it was available not only in English but in Welsh—I do not believe that that is helping people who really need this crucial support.

According to Citizens Advice, people who do not have online access are disproportionately likely to be disabled or to have a long-term health condition, and to be unemployed or on a low income. It is clear that the most vulnerable people will be the same people who will struggle to use a fully digital service and who will need extra support.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I welcome the fact that the helpline is at least now free, which it was not in the first place, but does my hon. Friend agree with me that there are far deeper problems and that actually the whole system needs to be looked at? Certainly in my constituency, universal credit is driving up debt, driving up rent arrears and driving up poverty for those in work and those out of work.

Danielle Rowley: I thank my hon. Friend for that very important point. I campaigned for the helpline to be made free and also welcome the fact that it is now, but my hon. Friend is right: the system is driving vulnerable people into hardship. They must be given the right support and not be rushed off the phone and directed to the online system, yet in February we saw, from the leak of a deflection script being used in call centres, that that was what was happening; people were being rushed online.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Lady is pointing out challenges with universal credit. Does she agree that digital exclusion is already becoming a significant problem under universal credit? Many disadvantaged people do not have access to a computer or the internet, and even if they do, the application process is very difficult for them. Does the hon. Lady not think that the Minister should ensure that implied consent is part of the universal credit system, to rectify some of the problems?

Danielle Rowley: The hon. Lady is right: there are many issues with this system, and digital exclusion is a huge one.

Since obtaining the deflection script documents, I have had discussions with a former case manager on the helpline, Mr Tarpley. I talked with him about how the leaked script comes across, and he explained to me that really it only hinted at how much it was expected of call handlers to deflect people online. He explained to me that if someone called and asked to make a change over the phone, they would be told no by default. No matter what reason the caller gave, whether disability, bereavement or lack of digital skills, they would always be asked the same questions: “Do you have a mobile device?”, “Do you have any friends or family who can help?” and “Can you get to the library?” Call handlers would be told to explain that there are computers at the jobcentre that can be used for free, but I have heard from constituents that often, when the jobcentre is very busy, that is not the case; they are not able to access that help.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister knows about these issues, because I have written to him about them. Does the hon. Lady agree that, given the murky way in which universal credit is worked out, with staff members often not even having access to the payment plan, people being expected to hold on for hours on the phone for the information and then being told that there is no information is not acceptable? Does she agree that perhaps the Minister should be looking at ensuring that staff members are trained to the standard necessary to enable people to get the answers that they need, at the time that they need them?

Danielle Rowley: That is a very important point. I will come on to staff and training.

The burden on the staff is a significant point as well. Bayard Tarpley told me:

“We were trained to never help callers on the phone unless it was going to lead to a manager call or complaint. If you did make the change, there was a risk of failing a ‘CEF’ check, in which a manager would listen to the call and rate it based on several elements of the call, with ‘following the deflection script’ being part of that criteria”.

Staff are being marked against deflecting people online. Some of that may now have changed, likely because of media coverage and pressure, but given the Government’s absolute lack of transparency on this issue, it is unclear what has changed, how much has changed and when changes have happened or are likely to happen, so I hope that the Minister will be clear today about those changes.

It is astounding that the Government thought that this was an appropriate strategy in the first place, and it raises very serious questions about how little consideration is given to the people’s experiences. I imagine that, in

his response, the Minister might point to some of the different training that call handlers receive to assess and deal with vulnerable callers, but I have been told first hand that although call handlers are trained to do certain things, that does not necessarily happen in practice. How much of the training is actually being implemented by managers, or are managers being told to do things differently? Are they being monitored?

When hearing about these strategies, it is no surprise that in many cases people have not received the support that they need from the helpline. That jeopardises and delays people’s payments and financial stability, at times with significant implications for their mental and physical health. That is something that I see and that other hon. Members here today will often see with constituents in their offices.

Earlier this year, I spoke to Sky News about the deflection scripts that were shown to me by whistleblowers, and it covered the issue. Sky News also highlighted the case of Brian. He was put on universal credit at the beginning of 2018. In July, he died by suicide. He was 59. His daughter Leann spoke to Sky News and said:

“He couldn’t understand the system from the very start. He was told to go online and access his journal but he didn’t have a clue about the internet. He was constantly ringing up and asking for advice but was told to go online. It really got him down.”

When she saw the deflection script, she could not believe that that was happening, but it rang true given the experience that her father had had.

A constituent of mine used the helpline after questions in his journal went unanswered; the online system had seemed to fail him. He was asking, for example, why the money that he was entitled to was not coming through. On the multiple times that he called, he was told that his inquiry would be passed on and he would be phoned back. That did not happen. When contacting the UC helpline, the shortest hold time that he experienced was 20 minutes and the longest 42 minutes. That has been backed up by Citizens Advice, which has found that at points the helpline has had an average waiting time of 39 minutes. My office has had to intervene for that constituent on three occasions, as well as for many others. My constituent believes that the problems would not have been resolved through his own efforts without such intervention. It cannot be right that people are only treated with the respect that they deserve and given what they are entitled to when an MP’s office or another agency intervenes. What happens to people who cannot get to an MP’s office or access that extra help? Bear in mind that these are some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

The ability to challenge decisions made on UC claims is particularly important. Recent research by the Child Poverty Action Group showed that one in five cases in a UC monitoring project involved administrative errors by the Department for Work and Pensions, resulting, for example, in a claimant being paid the wrong amount. The significant stress people face in not being able to manage the UC process has huge implications for family life.

Exactly three months ago today, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions essentially admitted to Sky News that deflection had been a strategy used by the universal credit helpline. She said:

“We’re going to make sure it’s absolutely clear in the future, there shouldn’t be a deflection script strategy and I have taken control to make sure that’s the case.”

Although I welcome that change, I have not heard anything since about changes that will be made. It seems that the issue has been swept under the carpet, so it is important that we get the answers today.

I have pursued the issue of deflection for months, primarily because of the significant implications for people's lives of not being able to get help over the phone. Macmillan Cancer Support welfare rights advisers have reported that people with cancer are often being redirected online. They have also said that there is inadequate training for helpline staff to cope with the specific concerns of cancer patients. One cancer patient claimant said:

"When I phone the numbers that they give me, they say they can't deal with it. I've phoned them three times. This is causing me more stress than the cancer."

We cannot have a situation where trying to get the help that the Government should be providing is causing people more stress.

The Government have been evasive with me throughout the discussion on the use of deflection. They have fobbed off my freedom of information request and denied that deflection exists, even in the face of clear evidence. They have ensured that they have not admitted in the House that deflection is taking place. I am still waiting for a reply to my letter on this subject to the Secretary of State dated 5 February. We have had to rely on leaks and whistleblowers to find out that these tactics have been used and their effect on people's lives. That lack of transparency seems to run throughout the system. The Child Poverty Action Group's report concluded:

"The combination of poor decision making and a system that is not transparent about how decisions have been made is causing significant hardship in people's lives."

I want to make it clear before I finish that none of the criticisms of universal credit, the way it is handled or the helpline are aimed at staff. Frontline DWP staff have some of the toughest jobs. They are under intense pressure. I believe they have a genuine desire to help people. However, they are working in a broken system, which must be criticised, condemned and changed. Families are turning to food banks. Working people are struggling to pay the bills. People with severe disabilities are being left without vital support.

The general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents call centre workers, said:

"Our members would prefer to be given the resources and time to give a first class service to help claimants. However they are instructed to use this deflection script as a means to get people off the phones."

It is another example of a government who has failed to invest in staff and support claimants."

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. The universal credit helpline is even more important because it is being used as back-up for journal entries, which are supposed to be the way that claimants are able to get questions answered during their claim. However, because it is the third trigger of the amount of work that staff have to do—after priorities zero, one and two—the helpline is picking up all these cases that should be answered by the journal, but there are just not enough staff to do that.

Danielle Rowley: My hon. Friend and other hon. Members—I am sad to see no Back-Bench Conservatives here—will be familiar with the experience of the journal letting people down, just like the helpline.

I have some questions for the Minister, which I hope he will answer. Will he take the opportunity to be clear about what happened in the Department leading to the development and implementation of a deflection script on the helpline? Will he apologise to claimants who have not received the support they deserve, often in times of great need, and to the whistleblowers on whom we have had to rely to expose these damaging practices?

Have any changes been made to the helpline since the Secretary of State said that there should not be a deflection-script strategy and that she had taken control to ensure that that was the case? If so, what changes have been made and what evaluation was carried out to inform those changes? When were those changes made, or when will they be made? What checks have been put in place to ensure that people receive the support that they need on the helpline and they are not deflected online? Does the Minister really believe that the helpline is sufficiently resourced and run, with the best interests of claimants in mind and staff being fully supported?

1.16 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. As we saw at the start, you are characteristically generous when dealing with colleagues. I thank the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) for raising this issue—I know she cares deeply about it. She has written to me, and I apologise that my response has not arrived yet. I signed that letter yesterday, so I hope she will receive it in the next 24 hours. She has also raised this issue in parliamentary questions and, in February, at DWP oral questions, when I responded to her. I will come on to that.

I will begin by setting out where we are in terms of universal credit. Universal credit rolled out to all jobcentres across the country last year. We now have 1.8 million people claiming this benefit. When we talk about support, it is worth pointing out that, over the last two Budgets, we have announced changes to universal credit worth an additional £6 billion—in particular to ensure that vulnerable claimants are supported in the transition to universal credit. That includes changes to work allowances worth an extra £1.7 billion a year. Those changes, which increase work allowances by £1,000, were brought in from April this year, providing a boost to the incomes of the lowest paid. That will result in 2.4 million families keeping an extra £630 per year of what they earn. I hope that underlines our learning and adapting approach.

We have always been clear that universal credit is primarily a digital service, which allows claimants to manage their own data and account online at a time that is convenient to them. Via their accounts, claimants can check their universal credit benefit payments, notify us of changes, and record notes via an online journal facility. Some activities still require a call from a claimant, as they are not yet automated, such as booking an appointment. The telephony channel remains an important part of our service offer.

The universal credit telephone helplines have been freephone numbers since the end of 2017. Claimants who call the universal credit helpline are connected directly to the person or team dealing with their case. We also have dedicated national service hubs, which provide telephony for third parties, such as landlords, welfare rights organisations and those citizens without a claim.

[Alok Sharma]

For those unable to access or use digital services—this is an important point—assistance to make and maintain their claim is available via the freephone universal credit helpline. The universal credit service centre will establish the best means of support for the claimant. We also provide comprehensive support for claimants who do not have digital skills or who do not have access to a computer. Support is provided in person in jobcentres and through the computers that are available for claimants to use, as well as through home visits for those unable to attend a jobcentre.

From April this year, we introduced a help to claim service delivered by Citizens Advice. This provides additional support for any claimant from point of entry to the first award of universal credit, and is available by phone, webchat and in person at local Citizens Advice outlets and jobcentres.

The hon. Lady asked about training. The DWP staff who service the universal credit helplines have a three-week facilitated learning period. That structured learning provides the skills and knowledge required to support them to answer claimants' queries. For new universal credit helpline call handlers, the learning journey is broadly made up of soft skills such as customer service learning, which covers how to gather information through active listening; equality and diversity training; and bespoke IT system-based technical learning, all of which is supported by consolidation activity.

Colleagues receive ongoing learning in their roles alongside experienced case managers and have access to universal credit guidance, which is refreshed at regular intervals. We are committed to continuous improvement, and as part of that we regularly review call plans, service levels and intelligence to improve our offer and understand why claimants are calling.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister may know that a jobcentre employee described universal credit as like being in a leaky boat: a leak springs up, and someone sticks their finger in the hole, but then a new hole appears, and they end up sprawled across the boat trying to block all the leaks. The holes are not the problem though; it is the boat. The Minister will know that many people and many groups in civil society believe that universal credit should be paused. Will he think about pausing it so that all the holes in the boat can be fixed?

Alok Sharma: I gently say to the hon. Lady that I visit jobcentres, as do my ministerial colleagues, and that is not the feedback that we receive from people on the frontline. In terms of pausing universal credit, we have been rolling it out across the country since December, and we have been clear that it will be the main welfare provision for the country in future.

To return to the universal credit helpline, when someone calls it they are presented with a series of options to select from. They are then put through to the agent best placed to answer their inquiry. All further triage is done through conversations to establish the claimant's needs. There are 26 service centres across the country that aim to support people with their universal credit claim.

We have between 5,000 and 7,500 staff answering calls in our service centres to support our customers. An important point in terms of the statistics—I would not

want any hon. Member to be in any doubt that we are making a big effort when it comes to supporting people over the phone—is that, in March, we answered about 1.3 million calls to the universal credit full service helpline.

The hon. Member for Midlothian talked about waiting times. In March, the average waiting time for a call to be answered was two minutes and 43 seconds. In February, the average duration of a call to the UC helpline was just over six minutes. I hope she will appreciate that it is not about rushing people off the lines but about providing support to them.

As I said earlier, the hon. Lady raised this issue in parliamentary questions on 11 February. I reiterate what I said to her then, which is that she has already been sent a copy of the universal credit digital channel document. She talked about FOI requests, but she already has that document, which is what DWP staff use as a guide when taking calls from claimants. She will be aware that the document says clearly that staff must use a common-sense and sensitive approach in resolving queries ahead of any digital discussion. Again, I want to be absolutely clear that there is no intention to deflect and there are no targets for getting claimants to use a digital channel.

The hon. Lady made several other points, including about supporting people who struggle with English or Welsh. We have an interpreting service available for those with language barriers. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of people being held on the phone and not being given an answer. We regularly review service levels on the UC helpline to improve our offer. If we cannot answer a question, we will call the claimant back.

Ruth George: The Minister says that the universal credit helpline is there and that staff are not necessarily trying to direct people on to digital platforms, but the complaints procedure for universal credit cannot be undertaken by phone—people are simply directed to make a complaint online. Those who struggle with online access are unable to do the very basic thing of making a complaint when they have a problem with the online service or the helpline. How does that square with his commitment that people are not being directed online? Will he make sure that people can make a complaint over the phone?

Alok Sharma: When a conversation takes place between a DWP staff member and a complainant, of course there is the opportunity for the staff member to answer the question. There are standard procedures when people want to make complaints. The hon. Lady takes a deep interest in such matters, and she knows that if any of her constituents ever have such an issue, she can write to me. I understand that, and it is incumbent on us, as Ministers, to make sure that we provide a response. In terms of the statistics that I have put out there, however, I hope she will appreciate that DWP staff make a huge effort to answer phone calls and deal with them sensitively. She also made a point about journal entries. The journal is available 24/7 for claimants to communicate with their work coach. That was not available under the legacy system.

DWP colleagues are fully committed to supporting claimants through a range of channels, and we are clearly making progress in the support we provide. In our latest

claimant survey, which was published in January, four out of five people were satisfied with the support they had received when claiming universal credit, which is broadly consistent with satisfaction levels in legacy benefits. Satisfaction levels are high, and the vast majority of claimants who use the telephony system found staff to be helpful and polite. Of course, I acknowledge that we want and need to continue to make progress and improve further so that everyone claiming universal credit gets the support they rightly deserve.

In conclusion, if hon. Members raise individual cases with me, I hope, again, that they will find that the Department and I are open and that we acknowledge when we have made mistakes.

Question put and agreed to.

1.26 pm

Sitting suspended.

China: UK policy

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

4.31 pm

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered UK policy towards China.

It is my honour and privilege to lead this debate. I must start by declaring an interest. Last year I was pleased to visit China as part of a delegation from the all-party parliamentary group on China, very ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) and superbly well organised by Saki Reid, the all-party group's administrator. That visit is one of the reasons I called for this debate—not the only reason, but one of them.

My simple proposition is that our policy approach to China should rest on three pillars: expertise, realism and wisdom. To start with expertise, it is important that we exert every effort institutionally to understand and gain expertise about modern-day China, and about the remarkable scale of the impact that its recent rise will have on all of us and on our children. Since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping started his reform and the opening-up of China, at least 600 million people have been lifted out of poverty. China's GDP has risen from \$150 billion in 1978 to \$12 trillion last year. China now has a defence budget of \$228 billion, which is second only to that of the United States. The rise of China and the growth of its economy is the single biggest event shaping global politics today, and indeed shaping issues such as climate, for example. It is therefore our duty to gain expertise in order to understand that.

The scale of the impact of the rise of China can be seen in, for example, Chinese pork consumption. That is perhaps an unexpected example, but it provides an interesting insight—the scale of China's impact on the world can often be seen in areas that one does not necessarily think about. Since the 1970s, when Deng Xiaoping put in place agricultural reforms, among other reforms, the scale of Chinese pork consumption has risen sevenfold. China now consumes almost 500 million pigs annually, which is actually half of the global production of pigs—I am quoting from an excellent report by *The Economist*.

That increase in consumption is about more than just calorific impact; it is also about the symbology of the new Chinese middle class being able to enjoy pork, which their parents were unable to do, and that represents a triumph over hardship that is part of the Chinese story. Also, the scale of that consumption has significant consequences for climate change. Water and accessible and available land are so scarce in China that it does not grow enough pig-feed to feed all those pigs, so more than half of all global feedstuffs goes to feeding Chinese pigs.

That has an impact all the way around the globe, because 1 kg of pork requires 6 kg of feed, mainly soy or corn, and whole swathes of what had been Amazonian rainforest in Brazil and other countries are now given over to the production of soya beans that are purely for Chinese pigs. In Brazil, more than 25 million hectares of land are used to cultivate soy. China is not one of the countries that has signed up to the soy roundtable,

[*Leo Docherty*]

which is a group of countries that have agreed not to consume pigs fed on soya beans cultivated on newly deforested land.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): As the hon. Gentleman is talking about international matters, does he agree that we should also be mindful of the human rights abuses in Tibet when we are thinking about trading with China? I think that is a very important issue.

Leo Docherty: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I entirely agree that, along with climate change and other important global impacts, we should certainly consider human rights when thinking about our relationship with China. I look forward to having a free and frank discussion about human rights later in the debate.

The environmental impact of the rise of China is absolutely huge. I gave the example of pork consumption because it provides quite a good mechanism for understanding the significance of the rise of China.

It is also important to understand the historical context of China's re-emergence as a global power, and that is exactly what it is; what we have seen over the past 40 years is not the emergence of China as a global power, but the re-emergence. Until the first opium war in 1842, China was indeed a serious global player, and in Chinese eyes the century between that war and the victory of Mao Zedong in 1949 represents a century of humiliation, which they are now trying to put behind them. That is especially the case because, in addition to the degradations of the opium wars, following the first world war Chinese ports such as Qingdao were handed to the Japanese. That humiliation is keenly felt in China even today.

It is really important to understand that historical context, because it is a central part of the new doctrine of China that has replaced the quiet rise under Deng Xiaoping. The new doctrine of Xi Jinping is much more assertive and seeks to return China to what it regards as its historically rightful place as an assertive and outward-looking global power. Xi Jinping has himself describes this new era as "the Chinese dream", not least at the 19th party congress in 2017. That must guide our thinking about China, and we therefore need to be very realistic.

The second pillar of the approach that I am proposing is therefore realism. We must be very clear and realistic in our understanding of what is driving the new doctrine of Chinese engagement with the world, because Xi Jinping, as well as seeking to return China to its historically rightful status, has reaffirmed the absolutely central role of the Chinese Communist party in the affairs of the Chinese state. This is about the party having absolute control not only domestically, but in relation to engagement abroad.

In seeking to understand the absolute priority placed on the role of the Chinese Communist party, it is useful to quote the evidence that Kevin Rudd, the former Prime Minister of Australia, gave to the Foreign Affairs Committee, which, as Members will know, recently produced an excellent report on China. Rudd, who is a noted sinologist, was talking about the central role of the party in Xi Jinping's China. As quoted in the Committee's report, he said:

"[W]hat are the core priorities of Xi Jinping's Administration at home and abroad? They intersect in this institution called the Party. The interest of the Chinese political leadership is for the Party to remain in power. That is the No. 1 priority, the No. 2 priority and the No. 3 priority."

When we consider China's foreign policy and its engagements with the rest of the world, we need to understand the absolute priority placed on the role of the CCP. We need to bear that in mind when we understand the belt and road initiative, or Chinese defence policy and the rapid, and quite alarming, increase in that country's naval capabilities—as a member of the Defence Committee, I have called for an inquiry into that. We also need to bear it in mind when we consider China's treatment of Hong Kong and of Muslim Uyghurs and other minority religious groups, and its attitude towards human rights more broadly.

The absolute priority placed on the role of the CCP also drives China's attitude towards domestic interference, which we in this country have experienced. I recommend to Members Charles Parton's excellent report for the Royal United Services Institute. That report lays out the range of influence, moving towards interference, that China has carried out in this country, particular with regard to academia. It is certainly food for thought.

When we consider our response, we must be clear and realistic. We must ground our relations with the Chinese state in a keen understanding of the risks, as well as the opportunities, of dealing with it. Of course, there are clear benefits—we have to be very clear about that. Our commercial relationship alone is worth some £68.5 billion a year, and we should also be seeking positive relations through joint efforts to tackle climate change and deal with issues such as UN peacekeeping. There are significant positive areas that we should be focusing on; our challenge is to have the wisdom to know what is good and what is bad, and to be able to focus on the positives. We need to recognise and deal with the duality in the relationship.

We need what I call a two-handed approach. On one hand, we should be reaching out a hand of friendship, co-operation, and commercial exchange with our Chinese friends. On the other hand, we should be clearly delineating with red lines those areas that are off limits, including critical national infrastructure, over which we should have absolute sovereignty. That other hand should also call out domestic interference, if that is taking place, and call for reciprocal respectfulness. It should make clear our unwavering commitment to our own rule of law, which is not something we should ever put up for negotiation. In my view, dealing with China through our foreign policy is not a zero-sum game. We need to have nuance, flexibility and duality in our mind, which requires wisdom.

Someone who was very wise about China was, of course, Dr Henry Kissinger. He was better placed than most to understand the Chinese state. In his magnificent tome, "On China", he calls for what he terms a "coevolution" through which China and the US, and by extension its western allies,

"pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict. Neither side endorses all the aims of the other or presumes a total identity of interests, but both sides seek to identify and develop complementary interests."

I propose that that spirit should guide our relations with China, and those of our western allies. That doctrine

precludes clumsy belligerence in the South China sea and requires an energetic China policy, based on expertise, realism and wisdom.

In conclusion, I will put three direct questions to my right hon. Friend the Minister. I would be grateful if he could explain what institutional effort is being made to increase the number of Mandarin speakers and other sinologists in the Foreign Office, because that is an issue of gaining sufficient institutional expertise and capacity. I would be interested in him describing in his own words what he understands the “golden era” to mean, in terms of the duality and balance in the relationship between the UK and China. Finally, I would be grateful if he could state what Britain’s ambition is for our relationship with China in a post-Brexit world.

4.46 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), who made an excellent case and covered quite a lot of areas that I would like to cover.

I want to declare an interest: I went to China through the all-party parliamentary China group, although that was in September 2017, so it was a long time ago. As a result, I formed the all-party parliamentary group for the belt and road initiative and China-Pakistan economic corridor, which is working hard to get UK businesses involved in the multitrillion-dollar belt and road initiative.

I appreciate that the subject of this debate is wide ranging, but I will limit my remarks to the issue of international trade policy. The key question for UK trade policy towards China is how best to engage with the belt and road initiative, which is China’s signature foreign policy. Last week, I chaired a panel discussion on Britain, Brexit and the belt and road initiative. As we prepare to leave the world’s single largest trading bloc, I asked how post-Brexit Britain should respond to China’s BRI, the world’s biggest ongoing infrastructure project. If Britain is to take a lead as an upholder of the multilateral, rule-based system, we need to be asking ourselves that question. Estimates of China’s intended investment in the BRI range from \$1 trillion to \$8 trillion; it is a project on an unprecedented scale, yet UK awareness and understanding of it are very limited.

At the belt and road forum two years ago, the Chancellor described the UK as a “natural partner” in that project. It is true that this country is well placed to complement that initiative. There is a lot of scope for the UK’s strong legal, professional and technical services sectors to support the delivery of BRI projects. Britain also has deep historical ties with China, as well as with key BRI partner countries, such as Pakistan. A project of that scale needs international co-operation and partnership, which is something we are well placed to provide. However, our international co-operation must be tied to a commitment to uphold human rights, as well as social and environmental protections. The hon. Member for Aldershot mentioned the Uyghur community in north-west China, as well as the significant role that China can play in climate change. That is really important.

Too often, we are offered two competing visions of China: the paranoid western image of China as a threat to the global order, often endorsed by advocates of Trump’s protectionism, or the image of China as a benevolent state, which is promoted by its state officials. If we are to cut through those narratives, we need to strengthen our multilateral institutions.

At the heart of the BRI is a spirit of mutual co-operation, but China can best embody that spirit by acting with more transparency, embedded in the rules-based international order. The UK can be at the forefront of that order by acting as a strong, independent voice on the global stage. In doing so, we can reject the failed doctrines of free trade orthodoxy and Trump’s tariff wars, to promote a just trade agenda.

In an era when unilateralism and protectionism are on the rise, it is more important than ever that we reject self-imposed isolation and explore fresh opportunities for UK businesses overseas. Under the right leadership, we can do that in a way that reflects our core values of mutual respect and shared prosperity. China should be no exception.

4.50 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I will make a brief contribution. When I was appointed as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria, I was called in by the Department for International Trade and told that I would have to develop my own personal policy in relation to China, as I was going to come into contact with the Chinese all the time. Nothing was more exact than that. They are everywhere; they are bidding for all the major infrastructure projects, and doing so in a largely transparent way. That provides an enormous opportunity for us if we can get the terms of the deals right.

It was made clear that it was up to me how that should be handled. Should I see the Chinese as the enemy, as opponents or as potential friends and allies? Because I am that sort of person, I wanted to see them as potential allies. However, doing so means identifying the areas in which we can establish projects with them where we can, effectively, be subcontractors to them.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Does it strike my hon. Friend as a little strange that he was given that advice?

John Howell: I do not find it strange in the slightest. It was absolutely accurate. To echo my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), it is an example of a practical approach to dealing with the Chinese on the ground in an overseas country.

Sir Oliver Letwin: But does it not strike my hon. Friend as a little strange that a country that for 4,000 years was half the world’s GDP, and that, as our hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) pointed out, is reasserting its position now as a quarter of the world’s GDP and, by some standards, as the world’s largest economy, is one in relation to which our Department for International Trade believes it has to subcontract policy to a trade envoy?

John Howell: No, I do not find that strange at all. It gives me the flexibility I need as the trade envoy to Nigeria to deal with the Chinese in the way that best suits the opportunities that are available. That is certainly what I have done.

As I was saying, I am a friendly sort of individual, and I would like to see relationships built with the Chinese. However, doing that is difficult for a number of reasons. First, I quickly found that, whatever the product is, it is often quite shoddy. Do we want to be

[John Howell]

associated with that? Secondly, I found that no projects can be changed without a reference back to Beijing. That makes it difficult to deal with the projects on the ground as flexibly as I would like. Nobody on the ground has the ability to make the decision.

The last thing that I found, which is by far the most important, is that the Chinese leave nothing behind. When they come over to do a project, they bring an army of people to do it. They do not involve the local community or leave behind anything in the way of knowledge transfer or anything tangible. That is so different from the approach of British companies. For example, Unilever, which I know is a hybrid company, has taken on board the modern slavery agenda, and has largely eradicated these problems from not only the company itself but its supply chain. I have met some of the individual non-governmental organisations that have been involved with that.

My overall feeling is that we should treat the Chinese with caution, and examine the details of projects carefully to ensure that we can add value to the local community. Otherwise, there is no point doing them. There is no point helping to develop a country if we cannot involve people in the project itself.

4.56 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. As we consider our Government's relationship with China, we must not lose our ability to speak openly and frankly about the actions of the Chinese Government. China's prosperity is highly impressive, and China has developed innovative solutions on many fronts to bring unprecedented numbers of people out of extreme poverty. I am sure that all Members present agree that, whatever the outcome of the Brexit negotiations, a strong relationship with China is essential. However, it is simultaneously necessary that we discuss areas where its Government may have fallen short of the standards that we expect of our trading partners and allies.

Last week, Ramadan began across the world. However, we have strong reason to believe that few of the Uyghur minority in Chinese eastern Xinjiang could practise their faith. In recent years, authorities have termed fasting a sign of extremism, dangerously conflating a mainstream religious practice with radicalism. Any sign of so-called extremism—such signs include wearing a veil, regular prayer and avoidance of alcohol—can lead to imprisonment in one of the huge internment camps that have been springing up across the region over the last few years.

Karen Lee: I commented earlier on China's record with regard to human rights, particularly in Tibet. These things have been going on since the 1950s, and we really have to focus on them.

Yasmin Qureshi: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

Last week, official briefings by the Pentagon claimed that as many as 3 million people could be imprisoned in those detention centres. Although the exact numbers are open to debate, it is clear that an enormous number

of people—at least 1 million—are being locked up against their will. We all want to have a trading relationship with China, but how can we ignore the fact that 1 million people are being detained? That is the minimum figure; the maximum could be 3 million.

Furthermore, although Chinese officials maintain that what they call “vocational training centres” do not infringe on the Uyghurs' human rights, they have consistently refused to share further information about those detention centres and have prevented journalists from examining them. Where reports have escaped the camps, we have heard rumours of forced indoctrination, harsh discipline and even torture. Such claims are profoundly troubling. In January, I spoke in another Westminster Hall debate on this issue, and it is worrying that little seems to have been done. With little discernible action from the Government, we are left only with mounting estimates of the numbers who have been imprisoned.

Tragically, just as prisons are rising out of the desert, ancient buildings are reportedly being razed. While the world rightly mourned the damage to Notre Dame last month, few heard of the total erasure of another ancient building over the last year. Satellite pictures show that an 800-year-old mosque, the Keriya Aitika in south Xinjiang, appears to have been flattened, depriving people of an important piece of their cultural heritage. According to a detailed article in *The Guardian* today, two journalists have investigated and found that at least 24 places of worship have been erased, including Imam Asim's shrine. Many people used to travel to that shrine three times a year, which was equivalent to completing the Hajj. It has been erased, and that is part of a wider demolition programme that appears to be being pursued across the province in an attempt to destroy its Muslim heritage.

Recent reporting also shows a more sinister element. The wider ecosystem of traditional policing and new technology is being used to construct what may be the world's most heavily monitored area. On top of a growing network of police stations and the centrally planned roll-out of DNA profiling, Chinese start-ups are developing algorithms that track members of the Uyghur community, specifically targeting them to analyse their movements and assess the “threat” they pose. That is possibly a unique development—intentional mass racial profiling through artificial intelligence—and the technologies are no longer being used only in Xinjiang. *The New York Times* reported that law enforcement bodies in the central Chinese city of Sanmenxia ran a programme that screened whether residents were Uyghurs 500,000 times in a month. The dangers of such technologies cannot be overstated. While the rest of the world is waking up to the danger of unintentional bias in code, China's Government are reportedly funding purposely discriminatory artificial intelligence. Ethical boundaries are being crossed with incredible speed.

There is also evidence that the issue does not just affect Uyghurs in China. Uyghur communities in Turkey, Pakistan and the US have stated that their family members have warned them against further contact for fear of persecution. Investigative research by *Middle East Eye* found that the World Uyghur Congress, a group that has represented Uyghurs at the UN, had apparently been put on a terrorist blacklist, yet hardly any country had made the case for that or asked for it.

Encroachments on freedom to travel, the ability to access funds and the right to remain in contact with one's family are fundamental deprivations of the most basic rights. Clearly, these issues require robust responses, and there are a number of avenues that we should be pursuing. More research needs to be done to understand which companies are involved in creating apps that are discriminatory by their very design. More broadly, our Government must provide more clarity over precisely what steps they are taking to provide Uyghurs with the support they need. Realpolitik claims that economic concerns should be prioritised are morally bankrupt and fail to face up to the enormity of the claims being made.

Perhaps the allegations are all false. Perhaps the satellite images and the other evidence are all made up. I am sure that the Chinese Government would want to dispel the rumours, and they can do so very simply. An independent group, whether led by a UN body, a human rights organisation or even a delegation of MPs, could be allowed to travel there to see first hand what is taking place. Unless that happens, we must recognise that moral lines may be being crossed that we can no longer ignore.

I have already asked this question once: what representations has the Foreign Office made to the Chinese authorities up to now? More importantly, what has their response been? Have they said, "This is all a load of rubbish. It is all made up. Come and have a look and we will show you what is really going on"? Will they allow an independent organisation to travel there to see? If China says that it is not doing any of this, and that these are false allegations, that is fine, but it must let an independent body in to have a look. That would also be beneficial to China, as it would dismiss the negative discussions taking place in our Parliament and in other places across the world.

The convention now seems to be that business interests are paramount in everything, but the human cost, and human rights, must come in somewhere. I am not comfortable that I can have a nice home—nice everything—at the expense of people in a number of countries we need to trade with who have no rights. That cannot be right. It is an immoral state of affairs. I ask our Government to find out if the allegations are correct. Whether they are or not, the Chinese Government should explain.

5.6 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It will not surprise colleagues or the Minister that I want to focus on issues of human rights, persecution and freedom of religion or belief. I agree that we should reach out with a hand of friendship to China, but a true friend does not flinch from telling another what might be unpalatable truths. I welcome the assurances from the Foreign Secretary on 2 April that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has been raising the issue of human rights abuses with China, and his assurances that it will

"raise those concerns with China at every opportunity."—[*Official Report*, 2 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 916.]

However, I am concerned that that is simply not enough.

In June 2016, the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission, which I have the privilege to chair, launched a report on human rights in China entitled, "The Darkest

Moment: China's Crackdown on Human Rights, 2013-16". At the launch, an MP who knows China well expressed agreement with all our findings. His one criticism was with the title. It was, he said, premature: "It will get even darker." From what I have observed over the past three years, he was right.

Last week, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom published its 20th annual report. It is an independent, bipartisan, US federal Government commission. It monitors the implementation of the right to freedom of religion or belief around the world in accordance with international law standards, and it makes policy recommendations to the US Government.

In its 2019 report, it identifies the ever-deteriorating situation of different religious groups in China. I will mention a few of its findings. First, the Chinese Government continues to take steps

"to 'sinicize' religious belief",

which not only diminishes or prevents the right to freedom of religion from being in anyway meaningful, but is also erasing

"the cultural and linguistic heritage of religious and ethnic communities".

The groups mentioned as particularly affected are the Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims, about whom we have already heard today.

Secondly, in the summer of 2018, reports emerged that the Chinese Government were detaining hundreds of thousands, possibly up to 2 million Uyghur and other Muslims in Xinjiang, in so-called re-education camps, allegedly to address the issue of extremism. Continuing reports come from those camps of abuse, primitive living conditions and disappearances.

Thirdly, it reports that more than 900 Falun Gong practitioners were arrested in 2018 simply for practising their beliefs or distributing literature about Falun Gong. The Government have also raided or closed down hundreds of Protestant house churches, including Zion church, Rongguili church and the Early Rain Covenant church. I will go into a little more detail about this, if I may.

Churches are being destroyed. Christians are being arrested, imprisoned and tortured. Members of the family are under surveillance, Christians are forced to deny their faith and young pupils in schools are investigated for their religious backgrounds. In the case of the Early Rain Covenant church in the city of Chengdu, police arrested more than 100 of its members in December 2018, including the pastor, Wang Yi, and his wife, Jiang Rong. They are being charged for inciting subversion, a crime that carries a penalty of up to 15 years in prison. A statement signed by 500 house church leaders says authorities have removed crosses from buildings, forced churches to hang Chinese flags and sing patriotic songs, and barred minors from attending. Indeed, one of the most disturbing issues in recent developments is that the Chinese regulations on religious affairs, which were implemented last year, banned five categories of people from attending church, including children under 18.

I know I have said some of this before, but I was interested to hear the Bishop of Truro being interviewed on Radio 4 on Sunday. He has just issued his interim report on the persecution of Christians worldwide—the interim report of the inquiry instituted by the Foreign Secretary himself—and has said that he is shocked by

[Fiona Bruce]

the scale, scope and severity of the persecution of some 250 million Christians worldwide. Almost 100 million are in China, and one of the things that I was interested in was that he said, “A lot of this has been out there, but it’s not really being heard.” That is why we have to keep repeating these issues.

Bob Fu, the founder of China Aid, told me last year that:

“Last year’s crackdown”—

on Christians—

“is the worst in three decades.”

The pastor of Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church, Huang Xiaoning, said:

“The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to be the God of China and the Chinese people. But according to the Bible only God is God. The government is scared of the churches.”

The tragedy is that the authorities in China now see faith as a threat to their authority.

Those statistics are just the tip of an iceberg of issues that are identified in the report I have mentioned, and which are happening all over China. Many Members of this House will be aware of the Open Doors organisation, which produces a watch list of persecution across the world. It rates countries according to the level of persecution. In the 2019 list, which was launched in January, China jumped from 43rd place in 2018 to 27th. Bearing in mind what I have just said, I do not believe that that will change. If anything, I think China will make its way closer to the top of the list.

Open Doors emphasises the Chinese Government’s plans to contextualise the Bible to make it more culturally acceptable—in other words, to rewrite it. However, the Bible is a sacred text. We hear of Christian preachers who are being required to adapt their texts to include the core values of socialism, and to have their sermons pre-checked by the authorities before they deliver them. Facial recognition cameras are being placed in front of pulpits so that the authorities can check on who is attending services and ensure that no one from the five forbidden categories is there.

In October 2018, the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China counted at least 1,422 prisoners of conscience in Chinese prisons, which does not include the mass detention of the Muslims in Xinjiang. The violations of human dignity that are involved in mass surveillance in China should cause us real concern. Apparently, 13 million Uyghurs are being monitored and watched in Xinjiang, often by smartphone technology and facial recognition cameras, as I have mentioned. An app is used by police to assess China’s integrated joint operations platform, or IJOP, which is a mass surveillance database gathering information from checkpoints on the street and in gas stations, schools and workplaces. It monitors individuals’ every action and triggers alerts to the authorities. Some of this very sophisticated intelligence can actually monitor the facial traits of categories of people such as the Uyghur Muslims.

A recent data leak from Chinese police contractor SenseNets revealed that the IJOP app had collected almost 6.7 million GPS co-ordinates in a 24-hour period, tracing 2.6 million people, mainly in Xinjiang. We hear that China has plans to have 400 million CCTV cameras in place across the country by the end of 2020. Is it not

reasonable that we have concerns about Huawei and what it proposes to do by using its technology in the UK?

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. We have two more Members who wish to speak, so could the hon. Lady kindly bring her remarks gently to a close?

Fiona Bruce: I certainly will.

Having heard some of these findings, I question what religious freedom is in China. Does it mean anything, and are we doing enough in the UK to challenge what is happening in China? Other states have taken a stronger stance on the issue. In response to the situation in Xinjiang, the US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, has called on China to allow international observers to visit, and for the release of people imprisoned there. He has mentioned that if China does not comply, the US could invoke sanctions. May I suggest that our Government should look to take much stronger steps on challenging human rights grievances in China?

5.17 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I had not actually intended to participate when I decided to come to this debate, but I find that I really want to. Although I accept that there are very considerable issues about the treatment of various groups in China, it seems that there is a much larger issue, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) began to attend in moving the debate. It really is very important that we should begin to attend to it.

The fact is that the world is being remade before our eyes. Between them, China and India are very likely to be the dominant features of our globe in the latter half of the current century, and they might simply reassert a position that was the norm until the industrial revolution. We should remind ourselves that after the industrial revolution, we in Britain were among the leaders in a period of imperialism and colonialism, and of aggressive mercantilism, in which appalling scandals were visited on both India and China. We inherited power in India at a time when the country accounted for 23% of world GDP; when we left, it accounted for 3%. I declare an interest in this issue: I am leading a project on India and China at the Legatum Institute—incidentally, I am the vice-president of the Great Britain-China Centre. Actually, one need not be involved in these things at all to know what the history looks like.

On China, the opium wars, which have been mentioned, were correctly described by an independent observer of the scene—namely William Ewart Gladstone in this House—as probably the most awful scandal that had ever until that time occurred in the relations between one country and another. We fought a war in order to force very large numbers of people to accept the export to them of a dangerous drug. It is not surprising, therefore, that India and China have certain issues with the west, and Britain in particular.

Nor is the construction of the so-called international rules-based order, which has been referred to, anywhere near as unequivocal as people often imagine. It is, in point of fact, a construct of the western liberal victors of the second world war. The whole international rules-based system, which is being replicated in a completely

different way in the institutions surrounding the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, has embedded in it western liberal values to which I happen to subscribe, but which are not at all the values of the entire tradition of Indian thought and postcolonial Indian thought from Nehru onwards, nor of Chinese thought, ancient or modern.

The abuses and problems in China that have been referred to are reminiscent of things that went on in our country for many centuries. It is helpful in many respects to think of Xi Jinping's regime as a kind of Tudor monarchy. The Tudors in this country, operating in part from this building, engaged in torture and religious persecution, and did all sorts of things of which we now do not approve. They also presided over the most vibrant cultural and economic renaissance that this country has ever seen, which gave great benefits to the world. They also initiated what became an industrial revolution—the greatest explosion of human progress and development, in economic terms, that had ever happened until the Chinese outdid it.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, in the past few years China has brought out of poverty the greatest number of people that has ever been brought out of poverty anywhere in the history of the world. It may in due course be overtaken by India, but unless and until that happens, it has a striking world record in improving the quality of life of its people. The fact that it is doing so in a way that does not wholly meet with the approval of western liberals is, first, no surprise, and secondly, something that, although I agree it should not be ignored, should not lead us to think that the major issue is what we think about China.

The major issue is a quite different one. My hon. Friend quoted Kevin Rudd, who happens to be one of the most sober-minded and sensible of the commentators, but in certain circles in Washington a powerful narrative is developing—this is why I asked him whether he really thought the Department for International Trade should be advising him to invent his own foreign policy vis-à-vis China—that foresees, almost as if it welcomes it, the prospect of an encounter, which actually means a world war, between the United States and China as China rises. Some of the more pessimistic texts have analysed cases in which one power has risen and succeeded the hegemony of another, and have found that rather few of such encounters have been peaceful. When Germany rose and sought to supplant Britain in the early part of the 20th century as the world's leading economic and colonial power, the first world war eventuated. There are many other cases of such shifts occurring, not because of ideological difference, but simply because one power overtakes another. That thesis is now prevalent in some parts of Washington. Alongside climate change, I think it probably constitutes the biggest single danger to our children and grandchildren.

What therefore seems overwhelmingly more important than our criticisms of China's internal arrangements, which we have a right, albeit a limited one, to criticise, is that we work with our allies to ensure we fashion a world for our children and grandchildren that does not disappear in a wholly unnecessary nuclear conflagration. That is a much bigger issue for humanity. Unless we start taking China and India seriously—not just in this country but in the west as a whole—unless and until the west as a whole recognises that it cannot expect to maintain hegemony in a world in which, on a very wide reckoning, there are 1 billion westerners and 2.6 billion

Indians and Chinese, and unless we reconcile ourselves to a peaceful coexistence based on a radical reassessment of the whole post-war structure, which was designed around the principles of western hegemony, we are heading for a very great catastrophe. That above all is the issue that we need to debate.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): I call Julia Lopez—no more than five minutes, please.

5.25 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this important debate, and on setting out a very wise and thoughtful approach to relations with China. Too often in this place we concentrate on short-term issues that are driven by the news cycle, while entirely overlooking critical strategic questions that will have a massive impact on our constituents over many years and decades. That shortcoming contrasts with China's approach. I hope that we can find a way of addressing it as we seek to reform our political system as we leave the EU and start to think with long-term vision about the UK's place in the world and our relationship with key allies and new partners.

The focus on the UK's relationship with China under the previous Administration, driven by Chancellor George Osborne, was welcome, if perhaps prematurely enthusiastic in certain sectors. It has reaped tangible benefits—notably, the impetus to make London the biggest renminbi trading hub outside China. However, Chinese influence within the UK is not without risk, and other big policy announcements deriving from that effort, such as the Chinese investment in Hinkley Point, threw up tricky questions about security and dependence. Broadly, we have a decision to make about our approach: do we wholeheartedly embrace the relationship with China; do we welcome what it can bring but handle with care; or do we take a cautionary approach that would exclude whole sectors of our economy from Chinese input, even if that means that we do not gain an understanding of its technological advances or benefit from its investment?

The Huawei case encapsulates that dilemma and highlights some of the trade-offs at play in our relations with critically important allies such as the United States. It should also make us ask why the western world got so behind in the development of 5G technology that it became reliant on Chinese telecoms firms. I would be grateful if the Minister could let us know whether there is work under way within Government and with allies to identify strategic areas in which China is gaining a competitive edge, particularly in autonomous weaponry and cyber-warfare, and how that edge might be leveraged in future.

Similarly difficult questions must be posed about the impact of Chinese wealth as that nation moves more decisively on to the world stage. China has a population of 1.4 billion, so even a tiny percentage of the most mobile and wealthy Chinese citizens will have a profound impact on global cities. I have travelled to Australia several times in recent years, and I was taken aback by the marked change I saw on my most recent visit due to growing Chinese influence, particularly due to the affluent student population and tourist numbers. That can be enormously positive, but how that wealth is handled—

[Julia Lopez]

particularly in relation to investment in domestic property markets—has the potential to cause public unease in the years ahead. Skyrocketing house prices in Auckland, New Zealand, have led to a ban on foreigners buying homes there, and there are already stringent rules on overseas investors in the Australian and Singaporean property markets in response to such concerns. London may have to review its own openness.

Antipodean nations are at the sharp end of some of those policy dilemmas. They are keen to have a positive relationship with a strategically important near neighbour, but nervous of dependence or exposure. That nervousness is something we can both learn and benefit from as we seek a new role in the world at the same time as allies step up efforts to diversify risk. In that regard, although new free trade agreements with the likes of Australia and New Zealand may derive only modest benefits due to their market size, both countries have valuable experience from which we can learn. New Zealand was the first country to strike an FTA with China, and each antipodean nation has suggested smarter ways in which we might work together—for example, by fulfilling the demands of the burgeoning Chinese middle classes for safe, high-quality agricultural produce. I welcome my hon. Friend's tremendous exposition about pork markets.

We must be realistic and pragmatic about the power dynamic at play. We must place our relationship with China neither on an outdated sense of economic or technological superiority, nor on fawning weakness that leads us to be cautious about upsetting the apple cart. With respect to the latter, we should not underestimate what we bring to the table or allow ourselves to be cowed when we think that China gets it wrong, including on the kinds of issues that have been discussed, such as religious freedom.

China is aware of the growing unease about its expanding global influence and seeks credibility of the kind the UK can lend. That is partly why the Hinkley investment was so critical to Chinese ambitions in nuclear power. Last week the International Trade Committee heard from the Institute of Directors, which, in response to growing demand, is considering setting up a Chinese branch where Chinese directors could be trained in corporate governance. The picture is similar for UK corporate law firms.

Worries about the structure and terms of Chinese investment—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Lady please bring her remarks to a close, in order to leave time for the Front Benchers?

Julia Lopez: Certainly. I was going to say that my views on the belt and road initiative are similar to those of the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid). I also wanted to touch on my own observations from an all-party parliamentary group visit to Huawei's Shenzhen facility in November 2017. I was rather alarmed by how some of the facial recognition technology was deployed, which woke me up to some of the issues that we will have to handle.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot for securing such a fantastic debate. We really need more time to discuss such issues, which will be critical in the years ahead.

5.30 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to have the chance to speak in this debate. China is the biggest country in the world—even with a properly scaled map, it is difficult to understand its scale—with a population twenty times bigger than the UK's, and a land area two and a half times bigger than the whole of Europe. China is on its way to becoming the biggest economy in the world. Its potential as a partner for trade, cultural and educational exchanges is clearly enormous and the Government should rightly seek to explore such links.

As we have heard from a number of hon. Members, there is another, much darker, side to China that must be considered at the same time as potential deals, not just as an afterthought. China continues to operate one of the most authoritarian regimes in the world. For the majority of its vast population, the rights to express opinions, to participate in the democratic process, to read and write what they want, to believe what they want and to practise those beliefs, are at best severely curtailed and, all too often, completely absent.

A couple of hon. Members have spoken passionately and knowledgeably about the persecution of religious minorities. Some of those minorities represent 1 million, 2 million or 3 million people. We are talking about the rights of a huge number of people. The Foreign Affairs Committee recently reported that credible evidence shows that over 1 million people have been held in detention camps in Xinjiang province simply because of their Muslim faith. They are not a danger to anybody, they are not criminals or terrorists, and they have not done anything wrong; all they have done is believe in something and seek to live in accordance with that. As the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) so eloquently expressed, Christian communities in China very often meet with the same persecution, as do other religious minorities.

The response of the Chinese authorities is similar to responses to such atrocities elsewhere. First, they deny that detention and persecution is happening. Then they say that although there may be some harsh treatment, it is reserved for people who are a danger to national security. Finally, they say that what happens to human rights in China is China's business and nobody else's.

We simply cannot give any credence to that assertion. Will the Minister give an assurance that China will not be allowed to put up a border against international and universal human rights? We have human rights because we are human, and it would be a denial of the universality of human rights if we allowed the prospect of trade deals or inward investment to silence criticism of China, or any country that shows such contempt on such a huge scale for what should be international norms of behaviour.

There are also concerns about the degree to which China does or does not respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries, including those nearby. As we have heard, we must remember that China's history with other countries has not been happy. For an awful lot of the past 200 or 300 years, China's experience has been one of other countries oppressing its people, who retain, unsurprisingly, a significant degree of suspicion and wariness of anyone who introduces ideas that differ from traditional Chinese culture and beliefs. However, China cannot be allowed to trample

on the rights of its own citizens, or those of other countries, under the guise of protecting itself from external threats.

A potential downside to the rapid advancement of China's home-grown technology industries is that it is now easily capable of causing significant harm to others, including the United Kingdom, should it wish to do so. We are not allowed to know how serious that risk is—apparently, we are not even allowed to know whether the National Security Council has considered it—but the United States has concerns, as do a number of other traditional friends and allies of the United Kingdom. Will the Minister confirm that those concerns will not simply be swept away or sacrificed at the altar of a preferential trade deal?

The belt and road initiative has been mentioned. Although there is no doubt that it could provide a way for the wealth generated by China's economic resurgence to be more fairly distributed, we need to ensure that it is not used simply to make China's neighbours more excessively reliant on China, to the extent that they almost become satellites or colonies. I am aware that this Parliament has not always had a proud story to tell in the history of colonialism, but it would not be in China's long-term interests for its neighbours to become so reliant that they almost cease to exist in their own right.

Just over a month ago, the Foreign Affairs Committee published a thorough and worrying report that set out a number of concerns that need to be addressed when setting out our future relationship with China: the retrenchment of power in the hands of a small number of Communist party leaders, the persecution of religious minorities, the oppression of political opponents, the undermining of the international rules-based order, and the potential threat to the UK's interests and security. Those concerns are important and must be kept in mind by those negotiating on our behalf.

The Government were very quick to surround themselves with red lines before beginning the Brexit negotiations. The Foreign Affairs Committee has, in effect, asked for some red lines to be set in our relationship with China. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to those. Above all, we cannot allow the Government's desperation to land a trade deal with a major economic power to blind us to the substantial risks—both to us and to our way of life—if the wrong deal is agreed in haste and repented at leisure.

5.37 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is nice to see you in the Chair, Sir Edward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) on securing this timely and important debate—he has given us an extremely useful opportunity.

The hon. Member for Aldershot spoke about the re-emergence of China after the century of humiliation, to which the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) also referred. I do not quite accept that narrative. Of course, relatively speaking, China was very big in the 15th and 16th centuries, in terms of its economy, population and technological advancement, but its level of international engagement is completely different today.

I commend to hon. Members a book called “Vermeer's Hat”. It sounds as if it is about Holland, but it is really about the relationship between Europe and China in

the period before the century of humiliation. At that time, China was extremely closed; things went out via the silk route, but not much went in. That is different from the current situation.

The most revealing moment in the debate was when the right hon. Member for West Dorset asked the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) whether he found it strange that, when he was appointed as a trade envoy, the Government's advice was to have his own personal policy on China. That is an astounding revelation, which really says it all. I might as well sit down now—but I will not. We want to know from the Government what their policy is, because it has been swinging around wildly.

Sir Oliver Letwin: Does the hon. Lady recognise that the problem is not only this Government at this moment but the west over the past 30 years? Successive UK Governments and Governments around the world have simply not treated this issue with anything like the seriousness it deserves, as a result of which we see what we see in Washington.

Helen Goodman: The swings and turns have been peculiarly rapid. Under George Osborne, we were pressed strongly to engage economically with the Chinese; under the recently sacked Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), we were to have naval ships going into the South China sea. One does not normally expect to see such twists and turns in a mature European democracy.

The Foreign Affairs Committee report is excellent. It stated:

“China is seeking a role in the world commensurate with its growing economic power, and... This makes China a viable partner for the UK on some issues, but an active challenger on others.

The current framework of UK policy towards China reflects an unwillingness to face this reality. The UK's approach risks prioritising economic considerations over other interests, values and national security...there does not appear to be a clear sense either across Government or within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of what the overarching theme of a new policy towards China should be”.

The Committee also calls on the Government to publish a new strategy—that is a fair call.

John Howell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Goodman: I will give way, but I will not keep giving way, otherwise I will lose my time.

John Howell: The passage the hon. Lady just read out sums up exactly what I was saying. Furthermore, I treated my reaction to dealing with China with a great deal of seriousness.

Helen Goodman: I was not suggesting that the hon. Gentleman was not serious. In fact, he seemed to have a more serious approach to China than perhaps some members of the Government do. That is worrying.

The leak of discussions in the National Security Council was obviously wrong, but it was illuminating. We were shown that an unresolved dilemma and differences of view remain at the very top of Government. On the one hand, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary,

[Helen Goodman]

the then Defence Secretary and the International Trade Secretary argued against giving Huawei infrastructure contracts because of the security risks. On the other hand, the Prime Minister argued that such contracts should go ahead. We are left uncertain what the decision was, and why—

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Helen Goodman: The Minister will get his chance to speak in a minute.

Why are the other members of Five Eyes now saying that, if we give such a contract, they will be reluctant to share security information with us? That is extremely concerning. Over the weekend, we learned that the Cabinet Secretary is leading his own mission to Beijing, with 15 permanent secretaries. That is a huge mission to take to Beijing. I hope the Minister will tell us whether he is in agreement with the Cabinet Secretary that we need long-term engagement, or whether he thinks, like the former Defence Secretary, that we need to be much more cautious. What precisely is the Government's position?

The right hon. Member for West Dorset took a surprisingly relativist view. I thought that we were all western liberal democrats and that, as a western liberal democrat, it was completely respectable to stand up for those values, promote them and try to get other people in other countries to share and adopt them. I would point out two things to him. First, the Chinese have signed up to quite a lot of the big United Nations international treaties that were written in that framework. They did not have to sign them; they chose to sign them. Therefore, when discussing human rights in China, Myanmar or anywhere else, it is reasonable to hold other members of the Security Council to those standards.

Secondly, of course, it is true that we cannot force China to change and that we might be alarmed by what is going on in Washington. However, the best way to resolve such potential conflicts between large countries is to uphold the international rules-based order. That is the way to resolve such difficulties. Another question for the Minister, therefore, is about where the Government stand on the trade dispute between China and the USA, because that is a sort of proxy for future disputes and conflicts.

I also ask the Minister, as the Foreign Affairs Committee did, exactly what the Government's position is on the South China sea problem, and how they see us moving forward. It is right to uphold the international law of the sea, and we should be doing that, but I want to know what the Government see as their legal base and what their intention is.

The belt and road initiative has an upside, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) said, but it has problems as well. Where do the Government stand? Are they with Christine Lagarde? Does the Minister agree that China has problems with environmental standards and with how it puts a lot of debt on to other countries in pursuit of the initiative? If he is worried, what are the Government going to do about it?

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) were absolutely right to raise human

rights issues. To put another question to the Government, what will they do about the undermining of the civil rights of people in Hong Kong, where the Government have a legal position?

I am afraid that my conclusion is that we need a policy—China is a big, important country—so let us hear from the Minister what it is.

5.47 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank my jousting partner, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), for her robust views. In a relatively short time, I will try to say a little in response.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) for securing this debate, giving me the opportunity to set out the Government's position on what is undeniably the single most important geopolitical bilateral relationship that the UK has, and will have, in the decades to come. The "golden era", which was announced in 2015 by the then Chancellor, reflected the importance of that closer bilateral relationship.

Our relationship with China is broad and deep, involving constructive, positive and frank dialogue on major global issues and distinct challenges as well as opportunities, but it has the potential to bring enduring benefit to both countries. We are clear and direct when we disagree with China. Our approach is clear-eyed and evidence-based. For example, only at the end of last year we called out China as responsible for a particularly damaging cyber-intrusion.

The relationship is and must continue to be firmly rooted in our values and interests, but I absolutely accept the warnings of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). To my mind, he was a little too relativist—that was the criticism—but his warning is important, both in the broad sweep of history and in the risk that in some of what we say we can be accused of being hypocritical, given our track record. I will come on to the rules-based international order in a moment or two, but he is right that that order was not set in aspic in 1945. We cannot simply hold firm, saying, "That's it, that's the rules-based order and we can say no more." I am afraid that we cannot talk just about universal human rights without recognising the change in the world, the rise of China and India, and therefore the need to adapt and evolve the rules-based system with those two countries firmly in mind. Indeed, we need to engage firmly with them if it is to be a system that we can all rely on for all our citizens.

The relationship between our two countries is of global significance. We both are permanent members of the UN Security Council and the G7 economies, frenetically active on a range of global issues. We have together forged constructive collaboration on shared challenges. At the Security Council we address together issues such as international security and North Korea. On global challenges such as healthcare advances, climate change, money laundering, people trafficking and tackling the illegal wildlife trade, we have and will continue to have a lot in common.

I will try to cover all the issues that arose in the debate. On trade, in a post-Brexit world, trading relationships with non-European countries will become ever more important. It is anticipated that in the very near future China will become the world's largest economy.

It is therefore welcome that the UK's trade and investment with China are at record levels, currently worth more than £68 billion a year. We are seeking an ambitious future trading arrangement and will want greater access to China's market, to expand and develop our economic links, not least in the service sector, as China continues to reform and open up. During the Prime Minister's most recent visit to China, our Governments launched a joint trade and investment review, which is designed to identify a range of opportunities for us to promote growth in goods, services and investment, which in my view is critical in a post-Brexit world.

I was not sure it would come up, but my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) and the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) raised our relationship with national security and Huawei. China has become an increasingly important source of investment for the UK, and we are one of its most important investment destinations. Ours is an open economy—I take on board the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid)—and we welcome inward investment, but like any country we must ensure it meets our national security needs. That is true when we look at investment in key national infrastructure—raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot—whether from China or elsewhere. As we look at our 5G telecoms infrastructure, I assure the House that we will have robust procedures in place to manage risk and we are committed to the highest possible security standards. The Government will take decisions on the 5G supply chain based on evidence and a hard-headed assessment of the risks.

I was on the Intelligence and Security Committee in the 2010 Parliament when the issue of Huawei was first raised. It was raised at a conference in Ottawa, where we saw our counterparts from the US and Australia, as Five Eyes nations, take differing views both from each other and from us on some of these issues. Through the National Cyber Security Centre, the UK Government have undertaken a thorough review of the 5G supply chain to ensure that the roll-out of 5G is secure and resilient.

As many Members may know, Huawei has had a long-standing joint venture with BT going back almost a decade and a half. Arguably, those who oppose Huawei having any more involvement will have to recognise that that has already been worked through. The extensive review that we now have will go far beyond individual vendors or countries.¹ The decisions of that review will be announced in due course to Parliament. We want to work with international partners to try to develop a common global approach to improving telecoms security standards. We must all recognise that we live in a world of the rise of the fourth industrial revolution, of artificial intelligence, robotics and all the technology. Almost inevitably, there will be global standards. China needs to be fully engaged in that debate, in a way that India already is in cyber. We will have to make some very difficult decisions, but the choice in relation to Huawei has to be to try to engage, recognising that some standards are different, but to try to get as much protection as we possibly can.

To answer the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland, I am very pleased that Mark Sedwill is out in China, with 15 other permanent secretaries, allegedly. That seems a sensible statement about the breadth and importance of our relationship across Government Departments. Some

of the press reportage has suggested a dispute between Departments. We recognise the importance of the China relationship, and of course there will be some disagreements on issues between Departments—

Yasmin Qureshi: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Field: I will not, if the hon. Lady will excuse me, because I want to move on to human rights issues.

The hon. Member for Warrington South and my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster raised the issue of belt and road. Foreign investment will be essential to the success of the belt and road initiative. We have made it clear that we regard ourselves as a natural and willing partner for global infrastructure projects, but we are also clear that all projects must develop in line with recognised standards on transparency, environmental impact, including carbon emissions, social standards and—importantly—debt sustainability. Therefore, there needs to be a sense of transparency on international standards. That was the message that the Chancellor and the Minister for Trade and Export Promotion took to Beijing last month at the belt and road conference.

We have touched on the rules-based system already; it has been the cornerstone of international co-operation and global standards for decades—indeed, since 1945. We recognise that that system is under huge strain. China has been supportive of some of its features, particularly with regard to trade, but less so of others, where it regards itself as not having had an input in the western rules created in the aftermath of 1945. We have been disappointed by its failure to oppose Russia's annexation of Crimea or to support measures to strengthen the international ban on chemical weapons. We believe that with economic power comes political responsibility, and we want China to give strong and consistent backing for a rules-based international system. We must also accept that the system must adapt and evolve to take account of the fast-changing world.

I crossed out my section on the South China sea, but then the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland brought it up. Let me say this: our position remains unchanged. We do not take sides on issues of sovereignty, but our commitment is to international law, to upholding existing arbitration rulings and to freedom of navigation and overflight. In many ways, the disputes arise because of China's concern that there could be a question mark over freedom of navigation, given how important the South China sea and the Malacca straits are to its exports.

I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) that I can touch on the next issue for only a couple of minutes, because it deserves a lot more time. Our constructive relationship with China at a diplomatic level is underpinned by the growing links between our peoples. Many visitors and students come here. We hope those personal links will allow more mutual understanding and bode better for future co-operation and awareness of our values—and Chinese values for those who go there.

Promoting and defending those values is vital, which is why we take a proactive approach to influencing improvements in human rights and rule of law in China. Our concerns are set out year by year in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's annual report on human rights

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

[Mark Field]

and democracy, including many concerns about use of the death penalty, restrictions on freedom of expression, association and assembly, freedom of religion or belief, and civil and political freedoms. We continue to raise those at the highest level.

The Prime Minister raised human rights with both President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang during her visit to China in January 2018. The Foreign Secretary raised concerns about the situation in Xinjiang with State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi in July 2018, as I did with my opposite number earlier that month. We will continue to lobby on that and the Tibet issue. I have not had enough time to go into as much detail as I should have liked. I hope the hon. Members will excuse me, and I will write to them to set out blow by blow what we are doing and will continue to do in that regard.

It is very sad that we have not had a little more time. This has been a fantastically important debate, and I hope it is the first of many that look at the importance of the geopolitical rise of China and all our concerns with what is happening with the trade war, as my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset pointed out. I thank everyone for their contributions.

5.59 pm

Leo Docherty: The rise of China is shaking the world. It is our duty to work with the Chinese towards a shared future of peace, prosperity and reciprocal respect. I am very grateful to the Minister and all colleagues for attending this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered UK policy towards China.

Ivybridge Community College: Examination Pressure

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered views on examination pressure from pupils of Ivybridge Community College.

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Chair, Sir Graham. I am particularly pleased to welcome the Minister to his place, and delighted that a Minister of his seniority is here to respond to this short debate.

Just before Christmas, I met a group of bright students at Ivybridge Community College in my constituency to discuss a range of issues relating to their education, including their reaction to the Government's mental health Green Paper. For as long as I have been a Member of Parliament, Ivybridge College has been an "outstanding" school under three different heads. It is a real centre of excellence. The group of predominantly year 11 pupils I met did great credit to their school, their parents and, most importantly, themselves.

For more than an hour, we had a fascinating, in-depth discussion about their school experience and, in particular, the issues that impact on their mental health on a day-to-day basis. We discussed everything from exam pressures to the impact of social media, how students are taught to deal with mental health, emotions and general wellbeing, and issues of competitiveness during what, as we all know, can be some difficult teenage years.

On dealing with mental health issues, we must recognise that teenagers and young people in general are some of the most vulnerable in our society. They face issues that young people of my generation never faced, with modern communications and social media. We must therefore do all that we can to help improve their mental wellbeing by ensuring that help is there for them when it is needed the most. I promised to raise their concerns and the issues we discussed with Ministers to ensure that the people making the laws under which my constituents are being taught are fully aware of what life is like for the modern teenager living in Devon. I hope the Minister will bear with me as I take him through the concerns raised by this highly impressive group of young people.

First, year 11 student Lucy Ryder asked:

"What is a 'mentally healthy' student?"

We discussed that smart question. We think we know what mental health problems look like, but what does it mean to be mentally healthy? The group believe that could describe someone at peace with themselves for most of the time, accepting that there will be periods of stress and angst, particularly during important exam periods—Sir Graham, you may think, as I do, that that could also describe the life of a politician. A mentally healthy student should know how to lead a healthy lifestyle and feel comfortable approaching teachers and members of staff for help and advice when it is needed, without hesitation.

The students felt strongly that the Government focused too much on treatment and not enough on prevention, as was evidenced in the recent Green Paper on mental health, although its ambition to reduce the time it takes

young people to get treatment was warmly welcomed, as ensuring that we help students to deal with mental health conditions at the earliest possible stage is both best for them and saves money down the line, when certain conditions would require much more counselling. A House of Commons Library briefing paper published in April 2018 shows that the average waiting time for someone to receive psychological therapy in my constituency was between 16 and 49 days. Most people are therefore seen within six weeks, but an appointment to child and adolescent mental health services can take significantly longer.

Nell, one of the pupils in the group, said that six weeks is a long time in the life of a teenager, especially one going through difficult circumstances, with it certainly being long enough to result in mental health conditions creating a dark place for young people. That is an important point. Mental health conditions should be treated with the same urgency as physical injuries and disabilities. I explained that the Government are seeking to prioritise mental health treatment, but I am sure the Minister recognises that we have a long way to go. What steps might his Department take to improve focus on prevention rather than cure in the mental health of school pupils?

The students were concerned about the current delivery of personal, social and health education classes. When delivered properly, PSHE lessons should help to make up a balanced school curriculum, providing an important opportunity to discuss issues such as mental health, living healthily and wellbeing in general. However, the students raised an important point: not all teachers are comfortable in delivering mental health lessons. They remarked that it is difficult for a teacher who is not trained properly, or who may not have any first-hand experience of mental health issues, to deliver a quality and informative lesson on dealing with those issues.

One member of the group, Ela, provided a good analogy: we would not expect a Spanish teacher to deliver a history lesson, or vice versa. They are not trained in that field, and are not likely to have a good grasp of the subject. Part of the Government investment aimed at schools should allow them to provide specialist mental health teachers, who can empathise and show proper understanding of what students experiencing mental health conditions are going through and how they can best deal with it.

The group welcomed the ambition of putting mental health leads in every school and college, but felt strongly that we must go further. We must ensure that existing teaching staff are properly trained to identify students who are experiencing mental health conditions, and especially those who may be nervous or uncomfortable approaching their teachers or wider school staff directly to talk about it. Of course, that is all part of prevention rather than cure and responding to the changing issues of our modern age. The group would be grateful if the Minister commented on what more Government can do to ensure that teachers are fully trained in this area.

We moved on to social media. Now, old people like me are often quick to blame the mental health issues that our youngsters experience on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat—all of which I am very familiar with—but the students told me that social media is not the overriding factor playing on their minds that we think it is. In fact, they made a number of points that took me by surprise. They all

believed that, far from being an instrument of bullying or pressure, social media was, more often than not, the antidote to it.

Nell raised the point that bullying at school, both in the playground during breaks and in the classroom, can be far harder to deal with than that on social media. I had taken a view that was the polar opposite. The students explained that it is far harder to deal with bullies face to face during the school day, whether it be passing in the corridor, in the playground or indeed in the classroom.

If a student feels intimidated by someone in their class, that will have a negative impact on how they take part in certain lessons that they share with those classmates. It may, for example, make them less likely to take part in activities during class, perhaps by shying away from group tasks or by not volunteering answers to questions. That could prevent a student from achieving their true potential in that class, affecting their grades and results later. In their opinion, physical bullying remained a greater threat than bullying on social media, bad though that might be.

Evie raised an interesting point: social media, by contrast, is far easier to control. If a young person feels threatened or anxious by the actions or comments of another user or peer, they can simply block that person at the touch of a button. The bully or troll is then prevented from seeing that person's profile, pictures and comments. It is even possible to prevent certain words or phrases being used in comments on social media posts.

For many students and young people, social media acts as a platform through which to share their collective experience of mental health conditions and support each other, and it serves as a reminder that they are not alone in dealing with their challenges. Before I sat down with this impressive group, I had not fully recognised how social media can help students cope with bullying and threats.

I was interested to see in *The Times* today, which I was reading on the train on the way to London, new research that tends to bear out the point of view expressed by the pupil group, namely that the link between social media and lack of student wellbeing was not supported by robust evidence and may well be the opposite of the truth. Can the Minister comment on the Government's view on the impact of social media? I am sure he will agree that any comments should be based on science and not the prejudices of members of an older generation, such as me. Does the Minister agree that at the same time as closing down the worst excesses of social media, we must proactively promote the positive resources that internet platforms provide in helping youngsters to deal with mental health issues?

We spent some time discussing exam pressures. The Green Paper states that

"Children and young people with mental health problems are more likely to experience increased disruption to their education," and suggests that could be due to time off school. Results from a 2018 study by the Mental Health Foundation suggest that young people today have higher stress related to pressure to succeed than previous generations. Some 60% of 18 to 24-year-olds and 41% of 25 to 34-year-olds agreed that they experienced significant examination pressure, compared to 17% of 45 to 54-year-olds and

[Sir Gary Streeter]

just 6% of those aged over 55. I may have simply forgotten what it is like to sit exams, but those survey results chime with my own experience in the 1960s and 1970s. I do not recall exam stress being much of an issue, either for myself or my fellow pupils, but clearly that has changed significantly. The students at Ivybridge Community College were fairly unanimous about the impact that target grades and upcoming exams have on their mental health. I believe they are now under pressure in a way that my generation never was. Does the Minister have any research to support that point and does he think that examination pressure today is too great?

Lucy made an interesting point when she said that students do not want to feel like they are constantly in competition with their friends and classmates. She said that they want to work in class to support each other to get the best grades they can, particularly when, as in the case of GCSEs and A-levels, those results will be judged for a significant period of time and be used to gauge the likelihood of whether they will get into their preferred university courses. The students would prefer the approach to exams to be more collegiate, rather than overtly competitive. They felt that we should not understate the importance of exams in school but that we need to emphasise to students that doing badly in an exam does not mean their life chances are over.

Annabel argued that students are tasked with taking significant decisions about their journey through education from the age of 13, when they start choosing subjects to study at GCSE. These are important decisions, as they will inform which subjects they study at A-level and university. That brings a great deal of pressure at an early age. The point was made that students should not always feel that they are in competition with their fellow classmates to get the best grades or to out-do each other; students would prefer a culture of working together. Can the Minister suggest ways to improve the way students collaborate with each other to help to improve their performances in exams? Does it have to be so competitive?

Lucy suggested that at school students are taught that the workplace is full of competition and that they will be competing for jobs and promotions. That is true, but the difference is that adults have a choice about whether to be in competition with their colleagues in the workplace. Students do not feel that they have that choice; perhaps they should. We need to demonstrate more intentionally to students that the workplace is also about team work and collaborating with colleagues. That should be no different in school; we should encourage students to work with and to support their classmates.

On A-level and GCSE results days each year, influential people from the business world remind students that they got 2 Cs and a D at A-level, but that has not stopped them achieving their full potential over the course of their adult lives. That is an example of how social media can help students to see that people who do not test well can still go far. That is an important point on which I invite the Minister to comment.

Amelia argued that the Government need to reconsider curriculum and scheduling in the run-up to already stressful exam periods and to look at the impact that

target grades have on young people over the course of the academic year. Can the Minister comment on whether schools have sufficient flexibility?

I ask the Minister to join me in thanking the students at Ivybridge Community College—Lucy, Amelia, Evie, Ela, Lilana, Izzy, Annabelle, Nell, Ella, Katy, Katie and Cameron—for being so clear and robust about these important issues. They all contributed to an excellent discussion, although I have not been able to include all their points. Can I invite the Minister to fully take on board the comments made by those excellent pupils? They are pupils at one of the largest and most successful state comprehensive schools in the UK, which has been outstanding for as long as I can remember. They are intelligent and articulate young people, who demonstrated an extraordinary understanding of the issues affecting them. They were able to talk confidently and openly about how they feel their schooling could be improved, in the presence of their teaching staff. We should take notice of those fine young people and work as hard as possible to deliver for them.

I realise that the Government are already active on some of these issues. By aiming to put dedicated mental health leads into every school and college, the Government have recognised the need to take a co-ordinated, multi-agency approach to understanding children and young people's mental health conditions and are putting together the most effective package of treatment and support for young people. I welcome the fundamental principles proposed at the heart of last year's Green Paper: ensuring designated mental health leads in all schools and colleges, by providing an extra £15 million to £20 million per year from 2019, and encouraging schools and colleges to collaborate locally to help improve services for students and reduce NHS waiting times for young people's access to specialist services.

Whether we like it or not—or fully understand it—the mental wellbeing of our young people today is rapidly becoming one of the key issues that we must deal with. Although perhaps it has lessened in the last decade, there is still a significant stigma attached to mental health conditions that we do not necessarily see associated with other health conditions. I hope the Minister will agree that it is helpful to hear from young people themselves about the challenges they face, their response to them and what they request from Government.

Even though the students had been fairly robust with me, I left our meeting with an overwhelming sense of confidence in the future of this country. The pupils of the coming generation are exceptionally talented and committed to doing their best for themselves and our nation. We must now do all we can to help them achieve their potential; we do that best of all when we listen to them.

6.17 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) on securing the debate, and the pupils at Ivybridge Community College—particularly Lucy, Amelia, Evie, Ela, Lilana, Izzy, Annabelle, Nell, Ella, Katy, Katie and Cameron—on providing such clear and articulate views on this important topic. I recall visiting the college some years ago and opening

an excellent maths department. It is an outstanding school with a high proportion of pupils being entered for the EBacc combination of core academic GCSEs.

I agree with many of the points that the pupils made to my hon. Friend, including that mental health is about not just treatment, but prevention. There has been a lot of focus on the significant investment that the Government are making in increasing specialist children and young people's mental health services. The NHS long-term plan announced that by 2023-24 an additional 345,000 children and young people aged up to 25 will receive mental health support via NHS-funded mental health services and new mental health support teams, as referred to by my hon. Friend. Mental health services will continue to receive a growing share of the NHS budget, with funding set to grow by at least £2.3 billion a year by 2023-24. Spending on children and young people's mental health services will grow faster than adult services, and faster than other NHS spending. That investment will go a long way towards tackling the sort of waiting times highlighted by my hon. Friend.

The trailblazer areas testing our Green Paper proposals include some testing about how to achieve waiting times of a maximum of four weeks. But the trailblazers also focus on prevention. The mental health support teams that we are introducing will be linked to groups of schools and colleges, bringing expertise in dealing with milder and more moderate conditions, precisely to provide fast, local responses to issues as they arise. It is a huge undertaking. The teams will introduce a new, trained workforce, eventually numbering in its thousands, to provide support in the more preventive way envisaged by the young people of Ivybridge college.

The preventive aspects of our reforms do not stop there. The Department is providing up to £95 million between 2019 and 2024 to support the delivery of the Green Paper proposals, including the costs of a significant training programme for senior mental health leads, to help schools to put whole-school approaches to mental health in place.

The Ivybridge pupils emphasised the importance of PSHE to my hon. Friend. Our reforms in that area, making a new relationships and health education curriculum compulsory in all state-funded schools from September 2020, are probably the most significant preventive step of all. Health education includes a new requirement for all pupils to be taught about mental health. The aim of making the subject compulsory is to bring the quality and consistency that the pupils are calling for, ensuring that pupils are taught the right framework of knowledge to help them to lead a mentally healthy lifestyle and deal with the challenges they face.

The new subject will include content such as understanding emotions, identifying where someone is experiencing signs of poor mental health, simple self-care, and how and when to seek support. Schools will be required to teach the new subjects from September 2020, but we are encouraging schools to get under way sooner. We already have hundreds of schools signed up as early adopters, with more schools registering every day. To help schools to teach the new subjects effectively, we recently announced an additional £6 million in 2019-20 to design and develop the training and resources that schools need.

We are also building the evidence on what other support for wellbeing works in schools. Our children and young people's mental health and wellbeing research

programme is one of the largest studies of its kind in the world. Thousands of children and young people will learn how to use a range of innovative techniques to promote good mental health and wellbeing.

I was not surprised to hear the views of young people that social media can be a force for good in relation to mental health—although I was impressed by the range of apps that my hon. Friend is familiar with. Social media is part of life and relationships for young people, but for it to be helpful we need to make sure that the online environment is as safe as possible. The Government's recent online harms White Paper set out a range of measures, detailing how we will tackle online harms and setting clear responsibilities for technology companies to keep UK citizens, and especially children, safe.

We also need to equip young people with the knowledge to use the internet and social media safely, understanding how to deal with the different behaviours they will encounter online. That is why, to support the teaching of the relationships and health education content, we are developing detailed guidance on teaching about all aspects of internet safety, to help schools deliver the new subjects in a co-ordinated and coherent way.

We know that all kinds of bullying, whether in school or online, can have long-term effects on mental health as well as immediate impacts on pupils. The Government have sent a clear message to schools that bullying for any reason is unacceptable. All schools are legally required to have a behaviour policy with measures to prevent all forms of bullying. Relationships education will also include content on tackling bullying. To support schools further, we are providing more than £2.8 million to projects run by anti-bullying organisations such as the Anti-Bullying Alliance and the Diana Award.

My hon. Friend also talked about exam stress, which obviously is a particular issue at this time of year, with hundreds of thousands of teenagers up and down the country preparing to sit their GCSEs, A-levels and other exams. I take this opportunity to wish all those students, including those at Ivybridge, all the very best with their exams.

I would beg to differ from my hon. Friend on one point, when he says that exam stress was not much of an issue in the 1960s and 1970s. I think that exams are inherently stressful, for any generation. Perhaps my hon. Friend has forgotten, but certainly my own experience in the 1970s was that sitting my O-levels and A-levels was a challenging time. I know that for some students that pressure can get too much and can tip over into real mental health problems. Clearly that is a matter for concern, and the support that I have described is there to help those young people.

However, for very many young people the level of stress created by exams is manageable, so long as they are well supported by their schools, families and peers. Research shows that there is a clear difference between exam stress and exam anxiety, which is a cause for concern. Recent research found that young people recognise that exams can be a time of pressure and want their school to support them, especially on how best to revise and prepare for those exams. We trust schools to provide that guidance, and there is help to support them to do so. Ofqual support includes a blog aimed at teachers and a guide for students on coping with exam pressure, produced with Professor Dave Putwain from Liverpool John Moores University.

[Nick Gibb]

My hon. Friend mentioned that two of the students at Ivybridge had talked about not wanting to feel that they are in competition with their classmates. He also invited me to comment on the fact that there are many successful people who did not do well in their exams. He is quite right; no student should be made to feel that their life chances are over because they did badly in an exam. However, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his recent article on the subject, not many of those people

“would say that it isn’t important to do as well as you can.”

Few people succeed without preparing and working hard. All anyone can expect of our young people over the next few weeks is that they do their best.

Doing as well as you can does not necessarily come at the expense of others, and certainly not your classmates. It is fundamental to any qualification that it tests individual performance. Each young person will take that qualification forward with them into later life as evidence of what they know and can do. I also believe that it is right to expose young people to a certain level of competition, to help build the resilience that will help them to make a success of their adult lives, but that does not mean that schools should not foster a collaborative spirit and encourage team working during the school year. Indeed, I would hope that all schools are doing exactly that.

That brings me to an element of our preventive work that is especially pertinent, given that this debate has been inspired by young people taking an interest in mental health and helping each other out. We know that young people turn to their friends and peers first when they have concerns about mental health. Peer support programmes can be an effective part of a whole-school approach to mental wellbeing, as well as in tackling bullying and supporting each other with their exams. We are working with the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families to pilot different approaches to peer support, to help more schools to develop or improve their own programmes.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend and the pupils of Ivybridge Community College for giving me the opportunity to set out just how much we are doing to promote mental wellbeing, as well as to increase access to specialist services. I hope they are reassured that what we are doing will go a long way to help schools and young people themselves play their part in meeting the challenge of improving the nation’s mental health.

Question put and agreed to.

Wales: Regional Development Funding

6.28 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of regional development funding in Wales.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I take this opportunity to welcome the Minister to his place. I have lost count of how many have preceded him. I have not counted how many days he needs to get through to exceed his predecessor, but I am sure that one of my colleagues will work that out as we speak. We wish him well and we wish him good luck—he is going to need it.

Regional development funding has been absolutely critical in boosting less prosperous areas across the United Kingdom, including in Wales. It is crucial in an era in which the divides in terms of wealth and prosperity in British society are so evident for all to see. We are witnessing a growing trend whereby our cities attract investment, create wealth and offer high-quality jobs, whereas our smaller towns are left behind or, worse still, buffeted by the winds of globalisation without any real support from the UK Government.

That has been the story of the last 40 years. UK Governments have stood by and watched the forces of globalisation and new technology destroy our industrial base and decimate our high streets, and they have been intensely relaxed about the impact of those changes on the pride, identity and prosperity of constituencies such as mine and others across Wales and the United Kingdom. First, Margaret Thatcher sold out the miners across south Wales, the English midlands and northern England, offering no state support to those who needed it to retrain in other fields. Then, although new Labour injected much-needed investment into our public services, it did not manage to deliver fundamental structural reform through a bold, radical industrial strategy. Then came Osborne-omics, which inflicted utterly self-defeating austerity on the areas that could handle it least.

As a result of this triple whammy, manufacturing has collapsed, from 30% of UK GDP to just 10%, since the 1970s. In comparison, Germany’s manufacturing base has remained stable, at 23% or above. The vast differences between the UK and German experiences of the last 40 years demonstrate conclusively that globalisation is not an unstoppable force of nature; it is a man-made phenomenon. The repeated failure to harness globalisation and make it work for our communities was caused not by force majeure but by repeated failures of political leadership.

The collapse of our manufacturing base has of course led inexorably to our skills and productivity crises. No recent Prime Minister has come up with any kind of half-decent strategy to support the so-called forgotten 50% who do not go to university or get good jobs and training. For those graduates living in the big cities, the last 40 years have delivered wealth, opportunity, diversity and the excitement of technological change, but non-graduates who live in our towns and villages have simply been ignored and left behind. Younger, diverse cities full of graduates continue to thrive; older, smaller towns with close-knit communities of non-graduates continue to suffer. Wales is a case in point. Despite the efforts of the Welsh Government—I will come to the

vital support the Welsh Government have delivered for constituencies such as mine—many parts of our great country have experienced hardship due to inept government at the UK level.

The gap in GDP between Wales and London makes the UK the most unbalanced EU member state in terms of regional economic disparities—a truly shocking statistic that shows the size of the challenge we face if we are to reduce inequality and spread opportunity. In Aberavon, we have had absolutely no regional development support from Westminster. The Swansea bay tidal lagoon would have put south Wales at the forefront of a 21st-century industry, marrying our desperate need to produce more green energy with the creation of genuinely high-quality jobs across the region.

Wales was the cradle of the first industrial revolution, and we could have been the cradle of a new, green revolution, but the Tory Government ran scared, spending £1 billion to buy the votes of each Democratic Unionist party Member but not a single penny for a long-term strategic infrastructure project that could have boosted wealth and opportunity for my constituents and so many across south Wales. I cannot help wondering whether that £1 billion would pass a value for money audit, given the voting behaviour of the DUP over recent months, but I digress.

The tidal lagoon decision followed hot on the heels of another broken promise: to electrify our railway lines. That promise made it only as far as Cardiff, with the line down to Port Talbot and Swansea still firmly embedded in the 20th century. With everything the Transport Secretary has achieved in his quite remarkable tenure, it feels that too little attention has been paid to this kick in the teeth for Welsh commuters and travellers and for the Welsh economy. Maybe handing a £50 million ferry contract to a company with no ferries was in fact a cunning plan to distract us from the fact that the Government he represents were holding Wales in contempt.

Thankfully, where the UK Government have failed, other tiers of governance have stepped in to give the Welsh economy a much-needed boost. The Welsh Government and local councils have combined to deliver so many crucial projects, but many have relied on the funding that we receive from the European Union—the EU structural fund.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Although the Swansea bay campus is in my hon. Friend's constituency, the £60 million EU investment in it has benefited my constituency incredibly. Does he agree that, given that we have missed out on the tidal lagoon and electrification, we now deserve assurances from the Government that structural funding will come to our region and to our communities?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree with every word. As I will come on to, the key point is that we must not receive a penny less; there must not be any sleight of hand in the shift from EU structural funding to the shared prosperity fund.

EU structural funds are distributed to regions throughout the European Union based on their relative GDP. Areas where GDP per capita falls below 75% of EU GDP are placed in the first tier, and therefore receive the maximum funding. The poorer the region, the higher its priority and the more funding it receives. West Wales and the valleys is ranked as a region of the highest priority, and

therefore received £2 billion for the 2014-20 cohort. No other area of the UK received more than £750 million, showing the scale of the challenge for the economy in that area of Wales. We are talking about a serious amount of funding here.

Like much of Wales, my Aberavon constituency has benefited hugely from European money, and from the strong vision and partnership working formed between the Welsh Government and our local Neath Port Talbot Council. Take, for instance, the new integrated transport hub—a Neath Port Talbot Council project in partnership with the Welsh Government, using EU money—or the sunken gardens and toddlers' play area on Aberavon beach, which is a Neath Port Talbot Council project using EU funding granted by the Welsh Government.

There are more, from the bay campus, as my hon. Friend mentioned, to the Croeserw community enterprise centre, to the Cognition mountain bike trails in the Afan valley, to the Port Talbot magistrates court regeneration project. Those projects would not have been possible without European funding and strong political leadership of a type we see consistently from the Welsh Government and our local councils, but too rarely from Westminster. That is why Brexit raises a number of concerns regarding the future of regional development funding.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Government have previously guaranteed that every penny from Europe that Wales lost would be matched by Westminster funding. That still has not happened. Has he noticed that, in the meantime, the Government have guaranteed that the British overseas territories will now receive from Westminster every single penny that they received from the European Union? Is it not a bit of an irony that the British Government are prepared to guarantee money to our overseas territories but not to our territories at home?

Stephen Kinnock: Indeed. That is a quite shocking example of the failure to prioritise what is happening right on our doorstep. It is absolutely vital that we see the funding in Wales that we need if we are to deliver. We all know how much support is required to deal with the huge changes in our economy over recent decades. We currently have a system that, while not perfect, works relatively well: EU funding is targeted at less prosperous areas and delivered by devolved Administrations who know the needs of their areas better than anyone else.

Now, we can debate Brexit until the cows come home—I am sure that we would love to—but I am sure that we can all agree that it is crucial that Wales does not lose a single penny of the funding that we would have received had the British public voted to remain instead of to leave the EU on 23 June 2016. The UK Government have agreed to replace those European funds, yet nearly everything about the shared prosperity fund is still to be worked out. We still do not know how much funding will be available. We need £1.7 billion per year UK-wide to keep up with what the EU is set to contribute from 2020 to 2026.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): There is an active debate ongoing about how the shared prosperity fund ought to be allocated. Some strongly argue that there

[Wayne David]

should be a huge competitive element. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is far better to have a needs-based formula, so that resources are allocated where they are desired, not according to which area can put forward the best bids?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree entirely. There are two key points. First, the big advantage of the current system is that it is depoliticised. The European Union works on the basis of data and facts and of a scientific analysis of what is required. There is a huge risk that the shared prosperity fund will be turned into pork barrel politics, where the fund gets used as a slush fund for, dare I say it, a Conservative Government in Westminster. Secondly, competitive bidding does not work. The shared prosperity fund needs to be embedded in an industrial strategy and a regional development strategy that works from a strategic point of view rather than being based on bidding.

The second key question is how this money will be divided across the country. The third question is what activities will be eligible for support. The fourth question is who will take the decisions on how the money is spent. We are still none the wiser on all those key questions.

It really is not just about the money. There is a real fear that this will be not just a financial grab, but a power grab: the Westminster Government will use this opportunity to reduce funding for areas that need it most and claw back powers that sit naturally with the devolved Administrations.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): This week is the 20th anniversary of the first elections to the Welsh Assembly. It is therefore important that, when we have this debate, we respect the role of the Welsh Government and devolution.

Stephen Kinnock: One of the key recommendations we in the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas have made in our report on the future of the shared prosperity fund—apologies for the plug, Sir Graham—is that the devolution settlement must be respected. Of course, the Westminster Government, the Assembly in Cardiff Bay and local authorities need to work as a team on this, but, fundamentally, the people on the ground know best how to spend this money and deliver maximum impact. Therefore, it is essential that the devolution settlement is respected in spirit and letter.

As I was saying, there is a fundamental worry that the shared prosperity fund will become a politicised slush fund, with a Conservative Government using it to buy votes in marginal seats. Those deep-seated concerns led to the creation of the all-party group, which I am proud to chair. The wide-ranging review we carried out heard from 80 organisations across the UK, including the Welsh Government, a wide range of local authorities in Wales and the Welsh TUC. Those representations were unanimous: the UK shared prosperity fund must comprise not a single penny less in real terms than the EU and UK funding streams it replaces. Westminster must not use Brexit as an opportunity to short-change the poorest parts of the UK and of our great country of Wales.

Equally, the UK Government must not deny devolved Administrations the appropriate control over funds. Local decisions must not be made by an official or Minister sitting at the other end of the M4.

While it is deeply disappointing that the Minister with overall responsibility for the shared prosperity fund, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), has refused to meet with our APPG, I am pleased to report that its officers met with the Secretary of State for Wales last month to make these points to him, and then last week with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Both meetings were conducted in a positive and constructive spirit, but it is shocking that there is still no sign of the public consultation on the SPF being launched any time soon. In fact, in one meeting there was a suggestion that the consultation may even be delayed until the comprehensive spending review in the autumn. Given that the CSR will include information on the funding of the SPF, I am not sure how relevant bodies, such as the Welsh Government and our local authorities, will be able to contribute in a meaningful way to a debate over funding when the horse will have already bolted. However, I can assure the Minister that our APPG will be watching carefully to ensure that there is no sleight of hand from the Government on this point.

Our APPG report contains 19 specific and deliverable recommendations. I hope the Minister has had an opportunity to read it, and we look forward to his response. However, in the limited time available, we would be particularly grateful if he responds to the following requests. Will he guarantee that Wales does not receive a penny less and that the devolution settlement will be fully respected, and will he provide clarity on when the SPF consultation will be published?

Let us be clear, the Welsh are a proud, resilient people. They are not looking for special treatment or anybody's charity. However, we are looking for a level playing field—an opportunity to compete without having one hand tied behind our backs. This is the essence of the Welsh spirit: an unrelenting commitment to community, fairness and the wellbeing of our future generations. With that spirit, every single Welsh MP on the Labour Benches will keep fighting to ensure that Wales gets the regional investment that it needs to thrive in this city-centric era of globalisation and fast-paced technological change.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): Order. To get in everybody seeking to speak, I will place a four-minute limit on Back Benchers' contributions.

6.46 pm

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing the debate. He has made such a superb contribution through the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas. I also welcome the Minister to his post. I want to speak briefly about regional development across north Wales.

At the time of the 2015 general election and its aftermath, there was a strong political focus by the then Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer on the development of the northern powerhouse. As the MP for Wrexham, on the border with England, I was concerned

that investment should not be focused on one particular city in the north of England, but should be spread to regions, towns and communities to the west. My concern was shared by MPs representing English constituencies to the west of Manchester. We established the all-party parliamentary group on Mersey Dee north Wales, so that we had a political structure to enable us to raise the issue politically.

In north Wales our economy works from west to east, rather than north to south. We were very encouraged by the response from business, local authorities, universities and the community as a whole in supporting the initiative that we had set in place, which we used as a template to campaign for more focus and more investment in north Wales. Together with the work of organisations such as the cross-border Mersey Dee Alliance, that template led to the momentum that brought about the north Wales growth deal project, which we all worked extremely hard to achieve. It was very important that that project involved all political parties in north Wales, as well as business and the academic community, through universities and further education colleges.

My concern—I am sorry to say this—is that since the announcement of the establishment of the north Wales growth deal late last year, the cross-party and broad nature of the work being carried out in north Wales has lessened. Certainly, the consultations that have been done by certain political parties and local authorities in north Wales have not been in step with the collaboration that led to the achievement of the growth deal. Rather than the partisan approach that a particular political party has taken, a consensus among political parties to work for the benefit of north Wales is required.

To deliver the north Wales growth deal, I want a new structure that is more in step with business in north Wales and that involves Members of Parliament and Assembly Members, regardless of their political party. We need to set up an accountable structure to deliver the future investment in north Wales that must be delivered. Certain areas in north Wales did not benefit from European funding—my constituency did not receive the same level of investment as other parts of Wales—so it is imperative that we rebuild the sharing and investment that we set up after 2015 as soon as possible.

6.51 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for the opportunity to speak in the debate, although, frankly, I would rather we were not leaving the European Union and not giving up the £370 million a year that Wales receives from European structural and investment funds. I hope that, three years on, the public are soon asked to decide whether they now wish to accept whatever exit deal is available or retain the much better deal we have as a member of the European Union. Today's debate encapsulates the Government's failings with regard to Brexit. We were due to leave the European Union more than a month ago and they have failed even to open the consultation they promised on how regional development funding will work in Wales after exit.

The lack of information about the shared prosperity fund is stark. I have asked 18 parliamentary questions about the fund and I am yet to receive a clear response on a host of vital issues such as when the consultation

will start, who will be eligible to apply and whether funding for Wales will be guaranteed. Perhaps the Minister will give us some information today—who knows?

Meanwhile, what happens to my constituents who would otherwise have continued to benefit from EU funding? What about the school leaver who could have obtained one of the thousands of apprenticeships that have been funded by the £71 million provided to the Welsh Government's skills enhancement programme by the European social fund? What about the student who might end up helping to conduct cutting-edge research on the causes of dementia at Cardiff University's revolutionary brain research imaging centre in my constituency? That centre exists only because of £4.5 million of funding that the European regional development fund provided to Cardiff University, but its work benefits dementia sufferers across the world. What about my constituent who just wants to drive across Cardiff bay to see family in Penarth, through the tunnel funded under the old objective 1 funding scheme?

Such opportunities and improvements to my constituents' everyday life are there only because the EU has partnered with the Welsh Government and local communities and has consistently invested a net gain of more than £680 million per year in Wales. Is it any wonder that we on this side of the House are suspicious about what, if anything, is coming down the line? We have had prevarication and obfuscation about the fund. It has that mythical air about it, as do many of the promises made after 2016 about life after Brexit. We were told by the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), the Environment Secretary and the Defence Secretary that Wales would not lose a penny from voting to leave the EU, but since the referendum result all we have heard about is efficiencies and targeting.

That raises deep concern on these Benches, because we have been here before. We were told that cuts to policing budgets were just efficiencies, before crime started spiralling; we were told that councils having their resources cut was just targeting, before the homelessness crisis hit our streets; and we were told that help was being directed towards the neediest constituents, before terminally ill people started arriving at our surgeries having been declared fit for work. Given that track record, the people of Wales have every reason to think that there will be less money, fewer projects and fewer opportunities for our communities.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon, I want the Minister to provide some guarantees to back up what his colleagues have said about match funding. The Government have failed to take decisive action to resolve the Brexit crisis. We have no clarity about future funding and we do not even have a date for the start of the consultation. It surely cannot be that difficult, because there is not much else going on, so perhaps the Minister could enlighten my constituents—they have been waiting long enough.

6.55 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on the case that he made.

[Gerald Jones]

As we have heard, Wales has been a net beneficiary of European regional development funding. In recent years we have seen towns and villages across the south Wales valleys transformed and regenerated, much of which has been due to European structural development funds. Wales has received millions of pounds more than it has contributed in recognition of the deprivation that exists.

Over the past 15 years, the upper Rhymney valley in my constituency has benefited from about £16 million in EU structural funds for regeneration projects, while in the Merthyr Tydfil part of my constituency the figure is £35.8 million. Merthyr Tydfil's town centre has benefited from significant regeneration, from a brand new college development to the creation of the hugely popular public space that is Penderyn square, which is a real focal point for a renaissance of Welsh culture and heritage, including the annual Merthyr Rising festival, which takes place over the spring bank holiday weekend later this month.

We have also seen regional projects, such as the dualling of the A465 heads of the valleys road, which links the Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney parts of my constituency and is a hugely important road link from west Wales across the heads of the valleys to the M5 and the midlands. That has all been made possible with the support of regional development funding from the EU.

In my previous life as a councillor for the New Tredegar ward in the upper Rhymney valley, I was heavily involved in the New Tredegar regeneration partnership. At that time, in 2001, the then Labour Government secured objective 1 funding for the south Wales valleys and west Wales, which resulted in billions of pounds of funding for crucial regeneration across the region.

The New Tredegar regeneration strategy helped to secure about £28 million for the community from a range of sources, including local regeneration funding from the Welsh Labour Government, which have helped to support and regenerate the Welsh valleys communities. The catalyst for the investment, however, was about £6 million of European funding. New Tredegar has new small business units, a new road, a community school, a museum, a community resource centre and a community café, all of which have helped to breathe new life into a community that was deeply scarred following the collapse of the coal industry under Thatcher. Regional development funding was essential to begin the process of regenerating valley communities.

Mrs Thatcher came to power exactly 40 years ago this weekend, which heralded one of the most difficult economic periods in modern history for many of the communities in Wales and created significant deprivation. The Thatcher Government ripped the heart out of our communities, threw countless people's jobs on the scrapheap and decimated villages and towns across south Wales without any plan to replace the jobs that were lost. The economic decline of that period can still be felt today, despite the investment in the valleys by the last Labour Government.

It was not just the jobs in the coal industry that were lost; there were many support industries. At the bottom of my street when I was growing up was Evans Coaches, a small family-run coach company that had taken miners to work since the 1930s. The company did other jobs, but that was its main business. Some 15 drivers worked

there, as well as support staff, all of whom were local. The company went out of business after Thatcher closed the pits. It is one of many heart-breaking examples.

I have outlined the history of the communities I represent and highlighted why the economic deprivation exists. We benefited from the regional development fund simply because we needed it. It is essential that we have clarity on a future regional development fund, known as the shared prosperity fund. A few weeks ago, during Wales questions, I asked the Secretary of State about it, but I received little response. I hope that the Minister can provide some answers about how it will work. We were promised that we would not lose a penny when we left the EU. We need answers, because the uncertainty cannot go on.

6.59 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for securing this important debate. The future of regional funding is crucial for Wales, and in the past it has been serious money. Wales has received more than £3.5 billion in European Union funding since 2000, and that money has made a difference. It has been a big boost for projects in Blaenau Gwent. There was the £77 million to support the dualling of the heads of the valleys road; there was the £7.5 million to help improve the railway line between Ebbw Vale and Cardiff; and there was a further £7.3 million to help build the new-ish Blaenau Gwent learning zone. Those important investments have helped many people to travel to work or to get the skills and qualifications they need. However, there is still much to do to help create opportunities for all our people. To do that, we need significant further investment. This funding needs to be in the pipeline and ready to go as soon as possible.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon said, given the recent extension of article 50 we need some clarity about the Treasury guarantee. In Blaenau Gwent we need three specific things: improvements on our railway line to Cardiff, with four trains an hour; road upgrades to the south and to the west; and the Welsh Government's Tech Valleys project to be supported through a dedicated training centre that will equip people for the jobs of the future. The eastern valleys and Blaenau Gwent deserve their fair share from the new fund. After losing coal and steel, our valleys are taking time to catch up with the rest of Wales and the rest of the UK. Both the UK Government and the Welsh Government need to prioritise our communities' industries, which previously powered not just the UK's economy but the world's economy.

Finally, the EU's structural funds were not meant to be a replacement for a UK-wide regional policy but, wrongly, that is what they became. I therefore urge the Government to make two commitments: to ensure that areas such as Blaenau Gwent get a fair deal out of the shared prosperity fund; and to ensure that in future those areas also get the capital spending they need from other investing Departments, such as those responsible for transport, business and culture.

7.1 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing the debate, and I welcome the Under-Secretary of State

for Wales, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), to his place—I hope that he will add some much-required substance to the Wales Office team.

Three years ago, Vote Leave campaigners promised that Wales would lose not a penny if we voted to leave the EU. If we leave the EU, Plaid Cymru is determined to ensure that they fulfil their promise. I will briefly outline the principles of Plaid Cymru's model for regional development funding. It would be a substantial new step in reducing regional inequalities across the UK; I think that Wales could take a lead in this regard.

Although the EU has the makings of a proper regional development policy, in the UK, by default, the regional policy is to favour London and the south-east of England. Wales currently receives £245 million more a year from the EU than it pays in. That we qualify for so much money reflects our poverty, which is on a par with areas in former USSR satellite states. It also reflects the extreme centralisation, the policy vacuum and the chronic underfunding by the UK Government. The worst inequality in any EU member state is indeed that between London and Wales, and leaving the EU will make the situation worse, unless the Government act.

Two years ago, Westminster committed to creating a UK shared prosperity fund that was

“specifically designed to reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations.”

We are on the cusp of exiting the EU, so where is it? Wales will not forgive a Westminster Government that cannot, or perhaps will not, plan for the funding on which so many of our communities are forced to depend. However, decisions on future funding must be timely. We cannot have a Government-caused funding gap disrupting the proper transition in the delivery of projects on the ground.

Replacing European structural funds with a well-funded UK SPF could be genuinely transformational for Wales and for the rest of the UK, but we need timely planning and proper funding to enable Welsh solutions for Welsh problems. Funding must be managed in Wales and be pre-allocated. A cut-throat bidding process would pit Wales against other regions and nations in a race to the bottom. Also, funding must be multi-annual. I think that all hon. Members here today will know of project managers who have so often been disempowered by self-defeating short-term funding cycles.

Finally, Welsh programmes should continue to meet the goals of European structural funds, with streams for employability and economic development, with any funding being co-ordinated with Welsh Government policy and spending, as well as meeting sustainability legislation, such as the very welcome Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Wayne David: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as far as Wales is concerned, it is important that any allocations are made outside of the Barnett formula?

Hywel Williams: Indeed, that is a crucial point, and one that I have taken up with Government Ministers. In my case—in north Wales and in much of rural Wales—that point is particularly crucial for farming. If we pit marginal farming on the uplands of Wales against the grain barons of East Anglia, we all know what will happen. The hon. Gentleman makes a crucial point.

Funding for Wales should meet the goals of the European structural funds. I also mentioned the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which is crucial in this regard. Decades of under-investment by the Welsh and UK Governments have led to chronic and disgraceful child poverty, as outlined in the Assembly this afternoon by my colleague Rhun ap Iorwerth, and to families having to choose between heating and eating. Leaving the EU will harm our communities further, unless the Government act properly.

The UK shared prosperity fund must deliver for Wales. Otherwise, ever more of our citizens will conclude—rightly, I believe—that we would be better out and in: out of the UK and back in the EU.

7.6 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I will be as brief as I can, Sir Graham. I thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas, for the work he has done in this area. It is important work and it has really exposed the lack of planning by the UK Government on a matter of such importance to Wales and Scotland.

It is quite disturbing that communities and charities have been waiting for years to find out what funding will be available after Brexit, and we urgently need from the Minister the details of this so-called UK shared prosperity fund. It is also important to note those issues that must be considered when setting up the fund, including its priorities and objectives, as hon. Members have already said, as well as the sums of money involved, the allocation method and model, the length of planning and who will administer it, because at the moment these matters are devolved matters, serving devolved priorities, which each devolved institution can decide upon and set the priorities for spending.

It is deeply worrying that, as the hon. Member for Aberavon set out, there appears to be a power-grab, plain and simple, because there is no clarity about what will happen. When questions have been asked about this, in local government questions and in other places, it has looked to some as though this process is a means of bringing powers back to the UK Government to decide what Scotland and Wales shall get, rather than Scotland and Wales deciding for themselves what they actually need. It is important that we do not lose that devolved power.

It is also critical for our communities and charities to know what the future funding will be. The EU funding will run out in 2020, and there are charities, businesses and all types of organisations the length and breadth of these islands that need to know, for planning purposes, whether or not they will have funding in just over a year's time. Yet we still have not seen a consultation, even though the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has promised to publish full details. In November the Wales Office told MPs that a full consultation would be published before the end of 2018, and six months on we are still waiting. I seek some clarity from the Minister today on exactly what that consultation will look like and when it will begin.

The only real information that we have had was a written statement from last July, which consisted of a future planning framework for England, which does

[Alison Thewliss]

not reassure any of us today that Welsh needs will be taken into account. I know that my colleague in the Scottish Government, Aileen Campbell, has written to ask about that issue, but she has not had much by way of a response that will set out what exactly will happen in those inquiries.

What we know is that analysis from the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions estimates that the UK would have been entitled to approximately €13 billion of regional development funds from 2021 to 2027 if the UK stayed in the EU. If the UK's Stronger Towns fund is anything to go by, the funding for the SPF will be only 10% of what the UK would have received from EU cohesion funds, so we need to know from the Minister today when this funding is coming, and will he guarantee that there will be not one penny less for Wales or for Scotland in the new fund?

7.9 pm

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I, too, extend my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for having secured the debate. Perhaps more importantly, I am grateful to him for having sponsored the “not a penny less” report through the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas. That report has informed the debate throughout.

This is the second debate on the shared prosperity fund over the past six months; the previous one was secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas). There were nine Labour speakers at that debate in November, and 11 are here today. The fact that so few Conservatives have attended speaks volumes about how important they view the shared prosperity fund for Wales as being. [Interruption.] Well done to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies).

“Not a penny less” has been mentioned by virtually every Member who has spoken today. Wales is home to 5% of the United Kingdom's population but receives 23% of European funding sent to the UK; “not a penny less” has been mentioned by every Member, and that is the level of funding that we want in future.

It is not only Wales that is concerned about the shared prosperity fund. There have been 177 written parliamentary questions about the fund over the past couple of years, many of which centre on the lack of consultation and detail that has been coming out—or, rather, not coming out—of the Wales Office, the Treasury and other Departments. We were promised a consultation in 2017, but it did not happen. We were promised a consultation in 2018, but by the end of that year it had not happened. As we speak, that consultation is nowhere in sight. We do not just need to secure the level of funding that we have received in the past.

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend is making an important point about the consultation. Does he agree that it is important that the consultation occurs as soon as possible, so that it can be fed into the comprehensive spending review and so that Wales can get its fair share?

Chris Ruane: I agree entirely. I am not sure what the Government are hiding, or why they cannot be open and transparent with the people of Wales.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very good point about asking Ministers. I have asked Ministers from the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, and the Wales Office. All of my questions have fallen on deaf ears, and when I have queried why the consultation is delayed, no Minister seems to know. My concern is that there is a question of trust: the Government have cancelled various projects that they promised they would deliver, and now that we are moving into the position of what will happen post Brexit, they cannot give us answers. That is why we on the Opposition Benches are so sceptical about what the Government will deliver in the long term. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Chris Ruane: As ever, my hon. Friend speaks immense sense.

We are concerned not just with the level of funding, but with the issues of democracy and respect for devolution in this, the 20th year of devolution. We do not want the Welsh Government to be leapfrogged, and for the Conservative Government in London to be undermining devolution by dealing directly with local government in Wales. If we do not have direct, democratic input from the Welsh Government, what happened in the United Kingdom will happen in Wales. When the Conservatives got into power, they vired education funding away from the poorest areas and towards the Tory shires. Nine out of 10 of the most deprived areas in the United Kingdom have had three times the rate of austerity cuts than the average.

The poor will be punished unless the Welsh Government have overriding responsibility for the allocation of funding within Wales. It is not just Labour politicians saying this; the Federation of Small Businesses has called for the devolved nations to retain the power to set their own allocations and frameworks for how funding should be prioritised, taking into account local economic needs. There is unity across the board, with the private sector, government and public sector all wanting the democratic control that we have had for the past 20 years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon gave his three demands: not a penny less; that devolution should be respected; and that a date for the shared prosperity fund consultation should be given immediately, as has been mentioned by virtually every single Member who has spoken today. I hope the Minister will at least be able to answer my hon. Friend's three questions.

7.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I will finish a minute early to allow the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) to respond to the debate. I congratulate him on having secured this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Members who have contributed today, showing their pride in, and passion for, the communities they represent here at Westminster. In particular, I thank those hon. Members who have welcomed me to my new post over recent weeks, and with whom I have already enjoyed discussions. My door is always open to those who want to engage constructively with the Government on issues that affect Wales and their constituents.

Although I have been in the Wales Office for only just over a month, I have managed to travel across the nation, so the issues raised today are already familiar.

Particular highlights of the past month have been, first, the visit to Tata Steel in Port Talbot, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Aberavon. There, I heard first hand about the exciting prospects for carbon capture and not just storage but use. I was also in Monmouthshire recently to talk with the local authority about proposals for a Chepstow bypass to cut congestion through the town, improve economic growth and link our Union more closely, given that the bypass will literally cross the English-Welsh border. Only last week in north Wales, I met the innovative telecommunications business Moneypenny—familiar, I am sure, to the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas)—which shows how Welsh firms compete on the global market.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Aberavon in his role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for post-Brexit funding for nations, regions and local areas. From what he has said today, it is clear that he is passionate about that issue, as are his colleagues who have also spoken. That is why, as he mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales met him and colleagues from the APPG on 11 March to discuss post-Brexit regional funding. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues found the meeting helpful and that it reassured him that this Government are taking future regional funding in Wales seriously.

Nick Smith: I congratulate the Minister on his role, and say “Well done” for travelling around Wales and hearing people’s concerns about the future. When will the consultation on the shared prosperity fund begin?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman; I will come on to the shared prosperity fund in a moment. Of course, if he invited me to visit his beautiful constituency of Blaenau Gwent, I would be more than happy to add it to my list of travels.

At this point, it is important to look to the future and at what the Government have committed in regional funding. In our 2017 manifesto, which I am sure was a popular read for everyone in this room, we set out our proposals for a UK shared prosperity fund to reduce inequalities between communities across our four nations. The UK’s shared prosperity fund seeks to provide the opportunity to move away from the old bureaucratic EU model, and to design a future regional funding model that truly benefits people across our United Kingdom in a way that reflects the specific needs and strengths of its different parts.

Jo Stevens: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: Not for the moment.

We will achieve our objective by strengthening the foundations of productivity, as set out in our modern industrial strategy, to support people to benefit from economic prosperity. As a Government, we have already begun engagement on the fund with the Welsh Government and key stakeholders in Wales. That engagement will continue, both at official and ministerial levels. Of course, a benefit of debates such as this is that we can hear the views of right hon. and hon. Members. It is important to recognise that direct engagement with stakeholders has already taken place, including with the third sector, universities and local authorities in Wales. Official-led events were held in Cardiff in November last year, and more recently in St Asaph on 30 January.

As has been referenced several times, the Government have committed to holding a public consultation on the design of the fund. The consultation will build on the conversations and engagement on the fund that have already taken place. That includes engagement with the Welsh Government, because we will respect the devolution settlements as part of the fund, as requested by Opposition Members.

I recognise that right hon. and hon. Members are concerned about the delay in the consultation. I make this point in response: the delay should not be misunderstood as the Government not being fully committed to the fund—we are. The dynamics of EU exit, not least in this place, often mean there is a fast-changing situation, so it would not be appropriate to speculate on specific dates for when the consultation will be launched.

It is worth reflecting on how constructive work has taken place between the UK and Welsh Governments on city and growth deals in Wales. By the end of the Parliament, every part of Wales will be covered by a growth or city deal. Cardiff and then Swansea, as well as, most recently, north Wales and then mid-Wales, are or will be benefiting from that collaborative approach to turbocharge economic growth regionally in Wales.

I listened with interest to the points made by the hon. Member for Wrexham. He may be aware that I was in Wrexham last week talking with local authority leaders and other members of the North Wales Economic Ambition Board. I respect the fact that it needs to be a collaborative effort, but what is key is that the proposals come from the region upwards, not Westminster downwards. Although we have to ensure that we are satisfied that the money will be transformative, it is about what the region thinks.

Ian C. Lucas: I encourage the Minister to engage with Members of Parliament, who have been very active in establishing the forum of the all-party parliamentary group, with which he has not yet engaged. It would be helpful if he would meet the all-party group to hear what Members of Parliament, who have the largest mandate, have to say to him on this important subject.

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his constructive intervention. I am more than happy to accept the invitation, although I have not been short of north Wales Members of Parliament wanting to come and see me. I have already met the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), and spoken with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb). As I said at the start of my speech, my door is always open to those who want to talk constructively, and I hope to meet on their patch as well, if possible. Certainly, I am more than happy to engage with Members of Parliament on these issues.

Nick Smith: The Minister seems reluctant to give us a date for when exactly the consultation will begin, but does he agree that it should begin, and finish, before the comprehensive spending review is delivered?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his further intervention. As I said, I do not want to get into specific dates, but I am clear that the spending review

[Kevin Foster]

will set out how we approach the fund in the future. I am not surprised to see such passion. We will ask people across Wales about the size, structure and priorities for the fund, and that will develop as we approach this year's crucial spending review. Given the continuing debates about our EU exit, it is clearly hard to give a specific date, although, as the hon. Gentleman knows, constructive discussions are ongoing between our Front Benches as we speak.

Hywel Williams: I understand that the Minister cannot go into any detail about the fund itself, but can he give us some indication of the principles behind it? Will it be based on need, or on some sort of competitive tendering or competitive proposals, either between Wales and other regions and nations, or even within Wales itself?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Our clear emphasis will be on ensuring that it works for local communities and delivers prosperity and growth across the nation. The consultation will set out our plans, and I am sure that he and other Members will be powerful advocates in ensuring that the fund works for their communities in the way they envisage.

I am conscious that many Members have raised the future of EU funding. In 2016, the Government guaranteed funding for UK organisations in receipt of EU funds where projects are agreed before the day the UK leaves the European Union. In July, the Government announced an extension to that guarantee, which will underwrite the UK's allocation for structural and investment fund projects under this EU budget period to 2020 in the event of the UK leaving without a withdrawal agreement. That ensures that UK organisations, such as charities, businesses and universities, will continue to receive funding over a project's lifetime if they successfully bid into EU-funded programmes before December 2020.

Our overall message is therefore business as usual. We want all places to continue to sign contracts while we still belong to these funds.

Wayne David: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: Not for the moment.

The December 2017 withdrawal agreement means that Wales will receive its full 2014 to 2020 allocation, because we recognise the importance of short-term certainty on funding. As we transition to longer term arrangements, we will of course ensure that all parts of the UK are treated fairly and that their circumstances are taken into account. We have promised, as I have already touched on, to engage the devolved Administrations as we develop the UK shared prosperity fund.

Wayne David: Will the Minister give way?

Kevin Foster: Given the time, I need to make progress.

I fully recognise the importance of EU funds to Wales. The guarantees set out by the UK Government show the importance that we place on those funds, as does the position that we have since reached with the EU on participating in the 2014 to 2020 EU programmes until closure. Under the terms of the withdrawal agreement, UK entities ripe to participate in EU programmes such

as Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ during the current multi-annual financial framework period will be unaffected by the UK's withdrawal from the EU for the lifetime of the projects financed by the current multi-annual financial framework. UK-based organisations and people will be able to bid for funding and participate in and lead consortia in 2019 and 2020.

In terms of our future participation, the joint political declaration published in November sets out a basis for co-operation in European Union programmes, subject to the conditions set out in the corresponding Union instruments, such as in science and innovation, culture and education, development and defence capabilities, civil protection and space. Of course, the UK would make financial contributions were we to participate in any EU programmes.

On the specific point made about Barnettisation and potential agricultural funding, direct payments will continue to be made on the same basis in 2019 and 2020. The Government have already confirmed that overall funding for UK farm support will be protected in cash terms until the end of the Parliament in 2022, providing more certainty than any other EU member state. Crucially, the Government are clear that they will not simply apply the Barnett formula to changes in DEFRA funding beyond this Parliament. That means that farmers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will not just be allocated funding according to the population size of each nation, which in each case is significantly smaller than that of England.

In the beginning, EU funding was seen as something of a panacea for all Wales's ills and as an opportunity that needed to be grasped with both hands. However, we should question whether, given the way that money was spent, it has reached those communities. We can all think of examples of projects that did not succeed, such as Techniums, the Ebbw Vale funicular railway and the All Wales Ethnic Minority Association.

I hear the passion with which many Members representing their communities have articulated what they see as the benefits of EU funding. However, we need to contrast that with the fact that some of the areas involved returned some of the highest leave votes. That was not based on whether a consultation was going to take place, but on what people perceived in their areas. It is a challenge for us as politicians to ensure that people see the benefit of what is done in their area.

As I set out at the beginning of my speech, the UK's exit from the EU provides us with a considerable opportunity to reconsider how we invest our money in a way that helps to reduce inequality across our four nations. The current system is bureaucratic, inefficient and difficult to access. With the UK shared prosperity fund, we would have the opportunity to design a fund that works in the interests of Wales and the UK as a whole. I am clear that we will do that while respecting the devolution settlements and continuing to engage with the devolved Administrations, as we have successfully and productively done and continue to do on growth deals, and as I have done personally since my appointment, in the shared interests of those we serve.

Ultimately, the Government want to see an economically strong Wales, within a prosperous and strengthening United Kingdom. Working alongside the Welsh Government,

through a future shared prosperity fund and other initiatives such as the growth deal, we can ensure that that becomes a reality.

7.28 pm

Stephen Kinnock: The Minister's speech showed that the Government are truly paralysed by Brexit. We could have a debate about that, but the fact is that that paralysis is having real-world consequences. What is the future of that key infrastructure project? What is the future of that vital skills project in our community? What is the future of that vital railway upgrade? We simply do not know. We do not have answers to those questions, and the clock is ticking. We are talking about 2020 as if it is a decade away. It is not; it is just around

the corner. These are multi-annual programmes that have a time lag in them, and the clarity should have been forthcoming months ago.

I and many other Members asked for a guarantee that Wales will not receive a penny less, a guarantee that the devolution settlement will be fully respected, and clarity on when the shared prosperity fund consultation will launch. It is a matter of great regret that answers to those three questions were not forthcoming. We will therefore continue to press the Government for some clarity on those vital points.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned with out Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 7 May 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business: Companies Register

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): One of the key foundations of our modern industrial strategy is delivering a strong, transparent and attractive business environment in the UK. The strength of the UK's business environment is founded on our fair and open regulatory frameworks. The companies register is the base on which that strength is built.

While the overwhelming majority of UK corporates operate wholly legitimately, concerns have been expressed about the misuse of UK corporate entities, the filing of false information on the companies register held at Companies House and the use of innocent people's information on the register to commit fraud and other acts of harm.

In the last three years there have been almost 10,000 complaints to Companies House from people concerned about their personal details, with worries including fraud and misuse of personal details topping the list.

We are therefore seeking views on a series of reforms to limit the risks of misuse. These include measures to: provide greater certainty over the identity of those shown as owning, running or controlling companies, including identity verification; improve the accuracy and usability of data on the register; protect personal information; ensure compliance and take action against offenders; and deter abuse of UK-registered corporate entities. We are committed to minimising burdens on law abiding businesses, especially the smallest. The consultation will therefore look at the best way to minimise burdens on businesses.

These reforms build on our global reputation as a trusted and welcoming place to do business and a leading exponent of greater corporate transparency.

The UK has one of the highest ratings for cracking down on anonymous companies, and the Government's proposed measures build on the Britain's world-leading anti-corruption activity. In 2016, the UK became the first country in the G20 to introduce a public register of company ownership, while new protections against identity fraud for company directors were introduced in 2018.

These measures will boost the reputation of the UK's business environment, ensuring reliability of the UK's company register. Knowing that a company's information is accurate and transparent is a fundamental part of a leading business environment—giving entrepreneurs and businesses the confidence they need to do business in the UK.

I will place a copy of the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1540]

EDUCATION

Timpson Review of School Exclusion

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Today the Secretary of State for Education will provide a statement to the House, announcing the publication of the Timpson review of school exclusion and the Government's response. Both the review and response have been published at: www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1541]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rough Sleeping

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire):

Early adopters of the Rapid Rehousing Pathway

In December, I announced the locations of the first 11 Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs, one of four elements that make up the Rapid Rehousing Pathway which were announced in the £100 million Rough Sleeping strategy last August. I am pleased to say that all 11 hubs are now operational. Furthermore, I can confirm that all 42 early adopters of the pathway, announced in February, are working hard to get staff in place and several are already delivering services. These 53 early adopters are focused on making sure that those who sleep rough, or are at risk of sleeping rough, are rapidly getting the support they need to move away from the street and sustain secure accommodation.

Rapid Rehousing Pathway new funding

I have now announced the allocations of up to £25.6 million of the second round of Rapid Rehousing Pathway funding. For 108 areas of the country this funding will provide:

20 additional Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs, to rapidly assess the needs of people who are sleeping rough and those who are at risk of sleeping rough and support them to get the right help quickly. This will bring the total number of hubs to 31,16 more than the minimum that we committed to in the 2018 Rough Sleeping strategy.

Up to £6.8 million of funding for 61 areas for supported lettings, offering flexible support funding to help people with a history of rough sleeping to sustain their tenancies in homes made newly available across the housing sector.

At least 130 navigators who will develop relationships with and help over 2,500 people who sleep rough to access appropriate local services, get off the streets and into settled accommodation.

Up to £3.5 million to establish or support 30 local lettings agencies to source, identify, or provide homes and advice for rough sleepers or those at risk.

A full list of the areas funded is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/rapid-rehousing-pathway-2019-to-2020-funding-allocations>.

With this funding, local areas will be able to connect people with the right support and sustainable housing to move them swiftly away from the street and facilitate their recovery. This important work is part of delivering on the commitments outlined in the Rough Sleeping strategy and is crucial in bringing us a step closer towards ending rough sleeping.

[HCWS1539]

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Restoration and Renewal

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Today, the Government publishes its response to the Joint Committee's report on the draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill.

The Joint Committee published its report on 21 March 2019. This report followed careful consideration by the Committee, taking evidence from a range of interested experts and stakeholders. The report set out a series of helpful recommendations on the content of the Bill and on wider issues related to Restoration and Renewal, including matters for the Shadow Sponsor Body to consider.

The Joint Committee was appointed by the House of Commons on 26 November 2018 and the House of Lords on 29 November 2018. It scrutinised the draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill ("the Bill") by considering written and oral evidence from a range of contributors, including the Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Andrea Leadsom MP and the Leader of the House of Lords, the right hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park.

The Government welcomes the Committee's report and considered "an evidence-based approach" the Chair and members of the Committee have taken in scrutinising the Bill. The support of the Committee and its endorsement of the overarching aim of the draft Bill is very important in progressing this important and pressing work. The Government are committed to establish in statute the necessary governance arrangements to oversee the Restoration and Renewal of the Palace of Westminster, and in doing so, ensuring it provides value for money for the taxpayer.

The Government are committed to introducing the Bill as soon as possible. We recognise that this is a significant and urgent task given the current state of disrepair of the Palace. The recent incidents in the Palace of Westminster, including masonry falling from the building have further highlighted the urgency of the works to restore and renew the Palace of Westminster. The tragic fire at Notre Dame has also served as a reminder of the risks to this historic and iconic building.

[HCWS1537]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Security Arrangements

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): This is a summary of the main findings from the report by His Honour Brian Barker QC, the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements in Northern Ireland, covering the period from 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018. His Honour Brian Barker concludes:

Throughout the reporting period I have been briefed periodically on the state of threat in Northern Ireland. I received presentations from PSNI and MI5 on the

practical effect of their co-operation and mutual reliance. My visits to PSNI establishments and to MI5 left an impression of deep commitment and professionalism, further demonstrated by their openness and willingness to respond to all aspects of my enquiries. Strong cross-border links continue with An Garda Síochána.

The context in which national security activities are performed in Northern Ireland remains challenging and members of the security forces continue to require vigilance in relation to their personal security. Dissident republicans continue to express political conviction to justify violence and law breaking, while loyalist paramilitaries maintain control in areas by self-justified intimidation and administration of violence. As in recent years there have been successes and considerable effort devoted to containing and disrupting dissident groups. Nevertheless, planning and targeting continues and attacks occur.

The number of security related incidents for this reporting period are broadly similar to my previous report; in 2017 shooting incidents rose from 49 to 58, whilst the number of security related deaths decreased from 6 to 2. There were 30 bombing incidents, and casualties from paramilitary style assaults (excluding fatalities) increased from 65 to 74; casualties from paramilitary style shootings (excluding fatalities) also increased from 20 to 27. The number of persons arrested and charged under s.41 of the Terrorism Act decreased from 18 to 13.

This period I have focused on Covert Human Intelligence Sources [CHIS]. There is excellent co-operation between MI5 and PSNI on CHIS operations, including frequent meetings between PSNI and MI5 at a senior level to discuss CHIS policy and operations. In accordance with the St. Andrews principles, PSNI manage the majority of national security CHIS. There is a systematic review procedure for CHIS.

The political situation is difficult and complex and throughout this reporting period Northern Ireland was without a functioning Executive and Assembly, despite a number of attempts at negotiations between parties; concern about the effect of the political situation was a recurring theme in many of my stakeholder engagements.

I met a range of stakeholders in this reporting period, including the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB), the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI), the Attorney General (AG) and the Committee on Administration of Justice (CAJ). NIPB highlighted the effect of not being able to fully operate, due to the lack of a functioning Executive or Assembly, and raised concerns that crucial decisions, such as an inability to retain their independent Human Rights Advisor, could lead to a diminution of trust in their work.

PONI outlined the challenge of balancing a large volume of troubles-era complaints against a limit to the resources available to investigate.

The Committee on Administration of Justice (CAJ) raised concerns about the effect of the lack of an NI Executive and the potential impact of EU Exit. They reported that their relationship with PSNI was good and improving. CAJ proposed a framework where the operational boundaries of MI5 and PSNI responsibilities relating to NIRT, paramilitarism and extreme right activity was published. CAJ believe this would have an international benefit and would give accountability and public acceptability.

A meeting with the Attorney General (AG), John Larkin QC, was productive. Within the scope of his remit, the AG explained his hope for improvement to certain elements of the criminal justice system, such as more informative defence statements and better monitoring of entrapment accusations and subsequent requests for disclosure.

Overall, I continue to be impressed with the standards and commitment of the senior members of MI5 and the PSNI and understand the frustration all stakeholders experience due to the lack of a functioning Executive.

I have measured performance in this reporting period against the five key principles identified in relation to national security in Annex E to the St Andrews agreement of October 2006. My conclusions are set out in the attachment table.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-05-07/HCWS1538/>

[HCWS1538]

Petitions

Tuesday 7 May 2019

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

The future of maintained nursery schools

The petition of the parents, carers and staff of Freshfield Nursery School in Heaton Mersey, Stockport.

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

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

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Ann Coffey, *Official Report*, 29 March 2019; Vol. 657, c. 5P.]

[P002443]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi):

Maintained nursery schools make a valuable and high quality contribution to supporting some of our most disadvantaged children. Many of them have specialist skills and knowledge in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities, and many of them share this expertise with other early years providers.

In acknowledgement of the costs that maintained nursery schools experience over and above other early years providers, the Government are providing local authorities with around £60 million a year in supplementary funding, to enable them to maintain the funding of maintained nursery schools.

On 28 February, the Government announced that this arrangement would be extended from March 2020 to August 2020, to enable local authorities to maintain the funding of maintained nursery schools for the whole of the 2019-20 academic year. This means that local authorities can allocate places in maintained nursery schools for September 2019 without uncertainty over the summer term in 2020. The cost of this extension will be around £24 million.

What happens after the 2019-20 academic year will be determined by the next spending review, and informed by new research published on 28 February on the services, costs and quality of maintained nursery schools.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Gibraltar representation in the Houses of Parliament, Westminster

The petition of British Citizens of Gibraltar,

Declares that it is a fundamental right of ours to representation in the Houses of Parliament, Westminster.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to grant Gibraltar representation in the Houses of Parliament, Gibraltar.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andrew Rosindell, *Official Report*, 27 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 460.]

[P002427]

Observations from the Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):

We believe that the 2006 Gibraltar Constitution—which was endorsed via a referendum by the people of Gibraltar—provides for a modern, mature and appropriate relationship with the UK. Gibraltar has a vigorous parliamentary democracy with institutions based on the Westminster model, and has responsibility for almost everything apart from foreign affairs, defence, internal security and some public appointments.

In addition, the UK Government believe that adequate mechanisms already exist for the people and the Government of Gibraltar to express their views. As well as the strong relationship between UK and Gibraltar Ministers, there is the all-party parliamentary group for Gibraltar which is proactive in raising the views of Gibraltar in parliamentary debates. The Government of Gibraltar attends the Joint Ministerial Council (JMC) for the Overseas Territories, which meets at least once per year and enables Ministers and representatives of Overseas Territories to register their points with the UK Government. In the context of leaving the European Union, the Government of Gibraltar also meets with the UK Government in the Joint Ministerial Council (Gibraltar EU Negotiations), which has met nine times since 2016, most recently in April 2019.

In summary, the UK Government believe that the fundamentals of our constitutional relationship are right but we remain as always open to dialogue on any proposals put forward by the Government of Gibraltar.

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 7 May 2019

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

World Immunisation Week

The following is an extract from the debate on World Immunisation Week on Thursday 2 May 2019.

Rory Stewart: We have worked out how to use the fact that Britain is the global leader in Gavi. Britain puts in 25% of the funds for this extraordinary global

programme of vaccination. The second biggest contributor is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the third biggest is the Government of the United States.

[Official Report, 2 May 2019, Vol. 659, c. 387.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for International Development:

An error has been identified in my speech during the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Rory Stewart: We have worked out how to use the fact that Britain is the global leader in Gavi. Britain puts in 25% of the funds for this extraordinary global programme of vaccination. The second biggest contributor is the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, **the third biggest is the Government of Norway, and the United States is fourth.**

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