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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 15 May 2019

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Policing

1. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of changes to the policing budget since 2015 on the operational effectiveness of Welsh police forces. [910816]

2. **Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): What assessment the Government have made of the effect of changes to the policing budget since 2015 on the operational effectiveness of Welsh police forces. [910817]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): We have been clear that ensuring that the police have the right resources and powers is a Government priority, which is why we are providing more than £1 billion of additional funding to the police in 2019-20, including precept, and additional funding for serious violence. Funding to the Welsh forces will increase by more than £43 million in 2019-20 compared with 2018-19.

Susan Elan Jones: I welcome the Minister to his place, but I wish he would not just regurgitate Tory twaddle. When the National Audit Office makes it clear that central Government funding to police has fallen by 30% in real terms since 2010-11, and when the cross-party Home Affairs Committee makes it clear that the funding structure is not fit for purpose, can we have some action? Can we have some standing up for Wales instead of the vacuous nonsense we get from this Tory Government?

Kevin Foster: It has to be said that anyone who wants to hear vacuous nonsense can just listen to those sort of attacks in the Chamber. Let us be clear: in 2015-16, the combined budget for North Wales police was £139.8 million; in 2019-20, it will be £115.8 million. That shows the increase in funding that is going on. Three out of the four forces in Wales are rated good for effectiveness, which is the subject of the main question.¹

Carolyn Harris: South Wales police are dealing with nearly 50% of all crimes reported in Wales in an environment of increased domestic violence, knife crime, serious crime and terrorism. Meanwhile, they face a

greatly reduced budget and the loss of nearly 1,000 staff. South Wales police are doing a good job; when will the Government give them the resources and the support they need?

Kevin Foster: The Government recognise the pressures, for example, in the recent announcement of additional knife crime funding, South Wales police will receive £1.2 million. In 2015-16, South Wales police had a budget of £255.1 million; in 2019-20, its budget will be £290.3 million.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in commending Welsh police officers for some of their recent successes in bearing down on county lines drug operations, which increasingly target rural areas? We welcome the additional money that was announced last week for South Wales police, but does the Minister agree that all police forces in Wales, including my own force, Dyfed-Powys police, deserve extra resources to tackle this evil trade?

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend perfectly highlights the fact that crime does not stop at political borders. Criminals and gangs in England target victims in north Wales, south Wales and in his constituency. It is a priority and there has been a focus on tackling county lines. That shows the importance of working together across political boundaries to tackle a crime that all our constituents are concerned about.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Dyfed-Powys police and Gwent police work closely with West Mercia police on county lines issues, drug running and child trafficking. What is the Government's view of the comments of Lynne Owens, director general of the National Crime Agency, that more funding is required for county lines issues?

Kevin Foster: I praise West Mercia police for their work to help tackle cross-border crime, particularly around county lines. The Government will always look to provide the powers and resources that the police need to tackle that, but it is also vital that we have joined-up working. It is also right that, as was touched on in the comments, we look to tackle the kingpins of those organisations, not just the street dealers, who we can see most easily.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): If Welsh policing was devolved as is the case in Scotland and Northern Ireland, there would be a £20 million windfall for Welsh policing. Does it not show how bad the England and Wales grant system is that we were better off under the Barnett formula? Is it not time that the British Government dropped their ideological obsession against devolving policing to Wales?

Kevin Foster: I do not recognise the figures that have just been used. As we touched on in answers to two previous questions, crime does not stop at political boundaries. Criminal gangs in the north-west of England target victims in north Wales as much as victims within England. The real political obsession is that of Plaid, which wants to determine things on political boundaries, not on how communities and criminals work.

1. [Official Report, 20 May 2019, Vol. 660, c. 5MC.]

EU Withdrawal: Welsh Economy

3. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on the Welsh economy of the proposed withdrawal agreement with the EU. [910818]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The withdrawal agreement means we can leave the European Union with a deal that honours the referendum result, protects our economy and security and safeguards our Union. The best outcome for Wales and the Welsh economy is for the UK to leave the European Union in a smooth and orderly way.

Jeff Smith: What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact of non-tariff barriers? They would result in customs procedures and technical barriers to trade, meaning delays and costs that would be particularly damaging to the Welsh economy.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that further underlines why the deal we have negotiated with the European Union will work in the interests of Welsh manufacturers, Welsh agriculture and other sectors across the whole UK. The political declaration says “as frictionless as possible,” which is the objective we want to achieve.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): The economy of Montgomeryshire is very dependent on the sheepmeat industry. Does the Secretary of State accept that retaining tariff-free access to the EU market is crucial to the future of all of rural Wales where sheepmeat is important? Will he do everything he can, alongside me and many others, to ensure that the withdrawal agreement is passed when it returns to the House?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend speaks with great authority and expertise, and he has been an extremely strong advocate for rural Wales in all the roles he has conducted, be it on the Development Board for Rural Wales, as an Assembly Member or, now, as a Member of Parliament. He is right about the withdrawal agreement and the support it has received both from the Welsh farming unions and from farmers directly because it will give them access to the European market and will allow them the freedoms that being an independent trading nation delivers, as well as stopping freedom of movement.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Some 12,000 jobs in the Welsh economy rely on steel. Given the crisis in this sector, how will the right hon. Gentleman work with the Business Secretary to get the steel sector deal over the line?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this important point. I spoke to a director of Tata earlier this week and, along with a Minister from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I will be meeting him next week. This is an important sector of the economy, not only for south Wales but for north Wales and the rest of the UK. The sector is of strategic importance, and we are determined to work to secure a steel sector deal that offers a long-term future.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Given that the Wales Office has no exclusive responsibility for any of the 300-odd work streams associated with Brexit and that we have had 20 years of devolution under a Welsh Government who have legislative and taxation powers, can the Secretary of State give the House a necessarily brief definition of his role and function?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting question. Of course the cross-Government responsibilities in which the Wales Office is active and interested go far and wide. I happily point to the crossings and the Severn toll as one example. Wales is also the only part of the UK to have a city and growth deal in every area.

Hywel Williams: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that answer but, just for starters: electrification of the railway west of Cardiff, abandoned; electrification of the north Wales line, a pipe dream; the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, cancelled; the post-Brexit shared prosperity fund, handed to an England-only Department; and, as I said, the Wales Office has no exclusive Brexit responsibilities. Is not his function just to nod through Conservative policies, whatever the cost to Wales?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman should be practical and realistic in what he calls for. He will be fully aware that electrification of the railway to Swansea offers no tangible benefits to passengers. He will also be aware that the Public Accounts Committee called for re-analysis of each section of the electrification, and it was on that basis that we came to the same outcome by delivering the most modern trains, which happen to be hybrid. Is he seeking to support a tidal lagoon that would be three times the cost of an alternative green provider?

Industrial Strategy

4. **Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) Welsh Government Ministers on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy. [910819]

9. **Albert Owen** (Ynys Môn) (Lab): What discussions he has had with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) Welsh Government Ministers on the effect of the industrial strategy on the Welsh economy. [910825]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have been working closely both with Cabinet colleagues and with the Welsh Government to ensure that Wales benefits from the industrial strategy. We have already delivered a number of projects in Wales, with Wales receiving £90 million from the industrial strategy challenge fund.

Mark Tami: What is the Secretary of State's Department doing to ensure that the north Wales growth deal actually happens, that the Heathrow logistics hub goes to Shotton and that more Welsh small and medium-sized enterprises work with our defence companies, such as Raytheon? He needs to get a grip on his Department—we have had more junior Wales Ministers than you could wave a stick at.

Alun Cairns: There have been countless engagements with local authority leaders across north Wales, and the growth deal is an important project. The hon. Gentleman

will be aware that, at the last Budget, we committed to funding for that scheme. It is a great example of where the Welsh Government, the UK Government and local authorities are working together. We are optimistic about signing and supporting a number of projects in the near future, but this is of course locally driven, and we are responsive to the demands and the drive of local authorities.

Albert Owen: The Secretary of State will be aware of the negative impact that proposed factory closures and the suspension of major projects has had on my constituency and on north-west Wales. Unemployment is already rising in my constituency, so we need an action plan. What positive steps can the industrial strategy put in place now, and what is the role of the Wales Office in delivering that action plan?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman points to unemployment data, but I would also point to employment rates. Identifying individual months will clearly offer one picture, but I think he would recognise the record numbers of people in work and the trend in falling unemployment, irrespective of what happened last month.

On the industrial strategy, I would point to the thermal hydraulics facility in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, which will be world leading. That is just one tangible example, in addition to the active investments we are pursuing elsewhere in the marine environment.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on any progress that has been made on the mid Wales growth deal?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the excellent work he is doing in supporting the mid Wales growth deal. The leader of Powys council was in Westminster last week, and I know she has met my hon. Friend. They have been key in co-ordinating and driving some of the themes that are developing from the deal. It is an exciting prospect, and they are working with Ceredigion council and the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), who has shown similar enthusiasm.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): A number of my constituents have set up companies in Cheshire that actually operate in Wales. What research and development grants have there been that benefit companies operating in Wales?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend raises an important question. I highlighted earlier the £90 million from the strength in places fund that had been made available to the UK's industrial strategy, making Wales fourth in the UK for the value of grants it receives. That works, absolutely as my hon. Friend highlights, on a cross-border basis, and the industrial strategy deliberately talks about cross-border growth corridors.

12. [910828] **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Steel is of course the foundation of any successful industrial strategy, so can the Secretary of State explain what he has done to offset the lost opportunities for Welsh steel producers such as Celsa in my constituency as a result of the loss of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon and the electrification to

Swansea? What projects has he actually secured to provide procurement opportunities to Welsh steel producers?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman points to prospects that the tidal lagoon may have provided, but when we analyse the data, it shows that demand from the tidal lagoon would lead to less than a month's output of steel, so I would suggest that he really look closely at the numbers. Was he advocating supporting a project that is three times more expensive than an alternative? The steel producers in his constituency would be extremely excited to get the go-ahead for the M4 relief road around Wales. The money is available and the planning recommendations are in favour—all we need is a decision from the Welsh Government.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The UK steel industry is undoubtedly a key part of the industrial strategy, but what benefit will the strategy bring specifically for Welsh steel making, which is important for my constituency, given that coil from Port Talbot is fundamental to tube production?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is a strong champion of the steel industry. He recognises how the investments in his constituency will also be important to the investments taking place in south Wales. There has been renewal of the blast furnaces in south Wales, and we are working hard to secure a steel sector deal. Those things will support the industry in north Wales and south Wales, as well as in Corby and elsewhere across the UK.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Wales is ideally placed to develop pioneering renewable energy projects, especially in wave, tidal and hydro, and that could make an invaluable contribution to achieving net-zero carbon emissions. Will the Secretary of State assure us that Wales will receive sufficient support from the industrial strategy, and in particular the £2.5 billion clean growth fund, to realise its potential, and that Wales will not be left to rue missed opportunities yet again?

Alun Cairns: I have already pointed out that Wales is fourth out of any UK nation or region in terms of being successful in gaining grants from the industrial strategy challenge fund. Swansea University's project for the active home is world-leading, using the latest materials to develop energy-positive properties, and just down the road from the hon. Gentleman's constituency is Pembroke Dock marina. These are exciting areas of policy from which his constituency can develop and take opportunities.

Shared Prosperity Fund

5. **Owen Smith** (Pontypridd) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund. [910820]

11. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund. [910827]

14. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund. [910830]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have regular discussions with the Welsh Government on a range of issues, including the UK shared prosperity fund. Officials have also already held useful preliminary discussions with their Welsh Government counterparts, and they will of course continue.

Owen Smith: A lot of people in Wales are worried that the shared prosperity fund is just a sneaky Tory plot to steal back a measure of devolution and cut our funds again. Will the Secretary of State reassure the House that that is not true? Will he start by telling us whether we will get £370 million in the first year of the shared prosperity fund?

Alun Cairns: Ensuring that all parts of Wales benefit from the UK shared prosperity fund is central to our approach. I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees with stakeholders throughout Wales, be they from businesses or local authorities, that there is a better way to deliver regional support than following the current model, which comes from the European Union. The hon. Gentleman seeks to tempt me to pre-empt the comprehensive spending review, which will of course talk about the quantum of the sum available.

Mr Sweeney: The Secretary of State will be well aware that the £1.3 billion a year from EU structural funds is vital to economies such as those in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the north of England. There is no clarity about what the replacement, the shared prosperity fund, is going to look like, and there has been no consultation whatsoever. Why has there been such a delay in the consultation, which was meant to happen last year?

Alun Cairns: Similarly, I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise that there is a better way of delivering regional support. Wales has received £4 billion over 17 years. We will consult shortly, but even ahead of that formal consultation lots of preliminary work is ongoing. For example, the Welsh Government and the UK Government were recently at St Asaph, where the Welsh Government jointly presented. That demonstrates the joint work that is taking place.

Chris Bryant: The Government are talking about awarding the money in Wales on the basis of a competition between different local authorities and areas. Can the Secretary of State quash that rumour? All the money will inevitably end up going to middle-class areas rather than to the areas of greatest need, such as the Rhondda. What is wrong with the fundamental principle of “From each according to his or her ability, to each according to his or her need”?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is pre-empting the consultation. We will of course work with local authorities, and there are different views among local authorities throughout Wales on how we deliver the UK shared prosperity fund. The hon. Gentleman’s local authority will have some frustrations as well as some successes in relation to the current European structural funds model, on which we have an opportunity to improve.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the UK shared prosperity fund will mean that Wales will not lose a penny as a

result of leaving the European Union? Will he also confirm that the funding could be used for projects such as the much needed Chepstow bypass?

Alun Cairns: The Chepstow bypass is of course a joint responsibility, but there is no doubt that my hon. Friend has campaigned vociferously for it for some time. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales visited the area within days of becoming a Minister, to work with my hon. Friend. I am determined to do everything necessary to ensure that we can deliver on that, but of course we need the Welsh Government to act as well and highlight it as one of their priorities.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The shared prosperity fund represents a huge opportunity for north Wales. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in designing the fund he will liaise closely with north Wales local authorities, and that he will urge his colleagues in the Treasury to avoid the temptation of simply passing it down to the black hole in Cardiff?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. We are of course already liaising with stakeholders in Wales, and with local authorities in particular. There is a range of views among local authorities on how we should deliver the UK shared prosperity fund. I do not want to pre-empt the consultation, and we will of course consider all the relevant matters. My right hon. Friend and I will want to deliver a scheme that serves all parts of Wales. That is central to our policy to ensure that every part equally can win some investment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Much to do and very little time in which to do it.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the new Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), to his place and inquire whether he is on a temporary or permanent contract?

Our manifesto for the European elections states:

“Under Labour, no region or nation would lose out on funding, and power over decisions affecting investment will be taken in Scotland, Wales and in English regions.”

Will the Secretary of State tell us what his party’s European election manifesto says about EU funding in Wales post Brexit?

Alun Cairns: I do not need to read any manifesto because I can repeat what I and the Chancellor have said previously. We have already committed to fund any project that has been agreed before our departure from the European Union, even when the funding date falls beyond that point.

Christina Rees: I am still not sure whether the Secretary of State has a manifesto. If he has one, it is incredibly well hidden. I could not find it. It is as well hidden as the UK shared prosperity consultation, which should have started before Christmas—where is it? Will he commit here and now to the principle of not a penny less, not a power lost for the people of Wales, and will he do his job for once and stand up for the people of Wales?

Alun Cairns: I will ensure that Wales receives its fair share. Let me point to the record of the hon. Lady's party in government and my party's record in government. As a result of the new fair funding settlement, Wales receives £120 for every £100 spent in England, far in excess of anything that her party ever did.

Devolution: Welfare

6. **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the potential merits of devolving the administration of welfare to the Welsh Government. [910822]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): The Silk commission's analysis in 2014 concluded that social security, including welfare, should remain non-devolved. This recommendation had cross-party support when it was considered under the St David's Day process.

Tommy Sheppard: Does not the experience in Scotland, where even a limited devolution of social security powers has allowed the Scottish Government to mitigate the worst excesses of Tory austerity and reduce rates of absolute child poverty, show that devolution works, and is it not time to allow the Welsh Government to design a social security system that fits the character and the aspirations of the people of Wales?

Kevin Foster: I must say that those who look at the social security system and at devolution in Scotland may draw a different picture from that being presented by our separatist colleagues. The reality is that there were a number of powers devolved in the Scotland Act 2016 that their party in Holyrood has decided not to use. I am afraid that those looking at Scotland will come to a very different conclusion from the one that the hon. Gentleman suggests.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): May I start by welcoming my hon. Friend to his place? As and when welfare powers are devolved, does he agree that it is important that we have devolved Administrations continuing to work with the Department for Work and Pensions to benefit those who most need support, rather than political posturing by those interested in breaking up the United Kingdom?

Kevin Foster: As always, my hon. Friend is right to say that it is time that the SNP-run Government in Holyrood focused more on the job of actually governing than on trying to build constitutional grievances. Yes, it is right that the DWP continues to work with all stakeholders across our United Kingdom to ensure that we provide the support that is needed as part of our welfare system.

Pension Credit

7. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of trends in the level of pension credit take-up in Wales. [910823]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): I start by welcoming the hon. Lady to her seat and to her first Wales questions. I am sure that

she will be as strong an advocate for her constituents as her predecessor, who was a much valued Member of this place.

The Government are committed to ensuring economic security for people at every stage of their life, including when they reach retirement. There were more than 100,000 claimants in Wales in receipt of pension credit in August 2018.

Ruth Jones: The Older People's Commissioner for Wales has found that £170 million of pension credit went unclaimed in 2016-17. This is a massive amount of money that could make a real difference to some of the poorest people in Wales. We know that pensioners in Wales are not taking up pension credit, but how are the Government monitoring this to note any recognisable trends, and what are they doing to ensure that pensioners in Wales receive the money that is rightfully theirs?

Kevin Foster: I would be concerned to hear of any person not getting the support that this Parliament has voted for them to have. We are engaging with people who may be eligible for these benefits at pivotal stages, such as when they claim state pension or report a change in their circumstances. We are also looking to work with stakeholders such as Independent Age and Age UK to discuss pension credit take-up across Great Britain. I encourage Members of Parliament to play a role in their constituencies.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Some 120,000 pensioners in Wales live in poverty. Today the Government have worsened their financial position with changes to pension credit for mixed-age couples, which will leave some married pensioners worse off by up to £7,000 a year. Will the Secretary of State meet the shadow Wales team, Citizens Advice Wales and pensioner organisations to listen to the just concerns and grievances of elderly citizens who have paid into the system their entire lives and now feel betrayed and left behind by this Government?

Kevin Foster: I suppose it is somewhat apt that a question on mixed-age couples comes to me—for those who know my own background. This is about balancing fairness between the taxpayers who pay for the pension system and welfare system, and those who need to benefit from it, and we do not believe that this change is unfair. However, we do need to ensure that those who are entitled to pension credit take it up and receive it. I am always happy to meet people to discuss how we can do that.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well—Mr Ian C. Lucas.

Ian C. Lucas: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

How many pensioners in Wales will lose out as a result of the Tory Government's hospital pass to the BBC to take away pensioners' TV licences?

Kevin Foster: The BBC has a strong and good settlement that it actually agreed. When it was last agreed, that settlement included the responsibility for this benefit.

Mr Speaker: Colleagues, today Ms Gladys Kokorwe, the Speaker of the Botswanan Parliament, is visiting the House. Indeed, she is with us for the rest of the week, accompanied by a team of colleagues. Madam Speaker, we warmly welcome you to our Parliament; we value our relations with you and your country.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910901] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 15 May.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): May I start by thanking the Mental Health Foundation for organising this year's Mental Health Awareness Week? Having good mental health is vital to us all, which is why we are investing record levels in mental health. We want to ensure that people receive treatment and care when they need it.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I will today be joining world leaders and internet companies for a summit in Paris on tackling terrorist use of the internet.

Alan Brown: I also support Mental Health Awareness Week.

Instead of a transplant providing my constituent Pauline Hunt with an improved and extended life, she has tragically received a death sentence after receiving a malignant kidney. Pauline rightly needs answers, and comfort that this will not happen to anyone else. Rather than her having to fight the system to get these answers, will the Prime Minister ensure that NHS Blood and Transplant undertakes a case review to identify why this malignancy was not picked up earlier and why red flags were not identified post-operation?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has clearly raised a very concerning case, and has given some details here on the Floor of the House. I will ensure that the relevant Minister looks at the issue, because it is obviously a matter of concern if somebody receives something that they believe is going to give them their life but that is actually a malignant organ, as has happened in the case raised by the hon. Gentleman. I will ensure that the relevant Minister at the Department of Health looks into the matter.

Q3. [910903] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): The Prime Minister has often spoken about how important it is to ensure that everyone gets a fair chance in life, which of course include carers. Will she therefore join me in welcoming the award given to Annette Collier at Friday's Pride of Rugby awards, run by our fabulous local radio station? Annette is a leader for Rugby Young Carers, and her great dedication, inspiration and enthusiasm is helping youngsters in my constituency to live their own lives.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this issue, because we obviously recognise the importance of supporting young carers. We have published a cross-Government carers action plan that is committing to improve the identification of young carers' educational opportunities and outcomes, as well as access to support and services. I am very happy to join him in congratulating Annette on this award and thanking her for the amazing work she has done and continues to do to support young carers. I also congratulate Rugby FM on identifying people in the community like Annette who are doing so much help the lives of others.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in acknowledging Mental Health Awareness Week. I want to send my support to all those campaigning all across the country to raise awareness of mental health, and a message that all of us can do something about it by reaching out and talking to people going through a mental health crisis, and also ensuring that there is proper funding for our mental health services.

I would like to pay tribute to the former Labour MP for Birmingham, All Saints, Brian Walden, who passed away this week. He was a very formidable figure in this House and a very strong political interviewer who every politician really loved being interviewed by at the time—but they only said that afterwards.

I think it would also be only right that the House of Commons pays tribute to a leading Hollywood icon and campaigner for animal welfare, Doris Day, who passed away this week. I am tempted to quote some Doris Day songs, but I won't. *[Interruption.]* All right—"Whip-Crack-Away!" *[Interruption.]* No, no, no. *[Interruption.]* I do apologise, Mr Speaker—I have obviously started a parliamentary singalong here.

Speaking of icons, it would be right to acknowledge that it is 40 years since my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) were both elected to this Parliament for the first time in the 1979 election.

In the last two years, nine of the UK's richest hedge fund tycoons have donated £2.9 million to the Conservative party. Is this a Government for the many or one in the pockets of an elite few?

The Prime Minister: Let me first respond to some of the tributes that the right hon. Gentleman paid. I am sure that everybody across the House would wish to recognise the sad passing of somebody who gave many hours of entertainment through her films and career—Doris Day.

I would also like to congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on having been elected to this House 40 years ago and having spent 40 years in this House. I also note that 40 years ago, of course, it was the election of Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative Government. It was always said that Margaret Thatcher had enjoyed being interviewed by Brian Walden, who did indeed not only have a career in this House but went on to have a very respected career in television journalism as a broadcaster and interviewer.

The right hon. Gentleman raises issues about fairness and equality, and those who are better off in our society. Can I just say to him that income inequality is

down since 2010? As Conservatives, we want everyone to be better off, everyone to have good jobs, and everyone to have a better life. But that is always the difference between us and Labour: Labour wants to bring people down; we want to raise people up.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Nobel prize-winning economist Sir Angus Deaton said that the UK risks having extreme inequality levels of pay, wealth and health. Of the G7 countries, only the United States is more unequal than the UK. Is that something the Prime Minister is proud of?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about income inequality and fairness. As I say, income inequality is down since 2010. The lowest paid have seen their wages grow the fastest since 2015. The top 1% are contributing more income tax than at any point under the last Labour Government, and thanks to the Conservatives, millions of the lowest paid are no longer paying any income tax at all. That is Conservatives delivering for everyone.

Jeremy Corbyn: Real wages are lower than they were 10 years ago. How can it be fair that we live in a society where the average chief executive of a FTSE 100 company now earns 145 times the annual average salary in this country? Some of the lowest rates of pay are among young workers. That is why at the weekend, I announced that the next Labour Government will abolish the youth rates, because, quite simply, if you are old enough to do the job, you are old enough to be paid the wage to do the job. Does the Prime Minister agree with that principle?

The Prime Minister: The impact of the policy that the right hon. Gentleman has announced is actually that it will cost young people jobs. That is not just what I am saying. The director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies said that the policy would

“end up having quite a negative effect on young people.”

But we do not need to rely on quotes to know what would happen to young people under a policy like that. We can just look at the record of the last Labour Government on youth employment. Under the last Labour Government, youth unemployment rose by 44%. Under the Conservatives in government, youth unemployment has fallen by 50%.

Jeremy Corbyn: I seem to recall that it was the Conservative party that opposed the national minimum wage in 1997. I seem to recall that it was the Conservative party that predicted millions of jobs being lost because we wanted decent pay for people.

Why do this Government continue to punish our young people? Since 2010—[*Interruption.*] Well, since 2010, the Conservative party, with its Liberal Democrat accomplices, has trebled tuition fees, abolished the education maintenance allowance and cut child benefit. While wages remain lower than a decade ago and housing costs have soared, more and more food banks are opening up in Britain. In Great Yarmouth, one has just been opened for pupils at a school, and last week the Department for Business established a food bank for its own staff in its building on Victoria Street. Can the Prime Minister tell us what is going wrong in modern Britain when a Government office in the centre of London has a food bank for some of its very low-paid staff to get something to eat?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I think that the best way to ensure that people have a good, stable income for their families is to ensure that they are in work. This is the fourth question he has asked me, and in none of his questions so far has he welcomed the fact that employment is at record levels, and unemployment is down at a record low. The way he talks, you would think that inequality started in 2010.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It did!

The Prime Minister: One of the Labour Back Benchers shouts from a sedentary position, “It did!” Who was it who said that the last Labour Government

“ensured that the gap between the richest and the poorest in our society”

became “very much bigger?” Those are not my words; they are the words of the right hon. Gentleman, attacking his own Labour Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about food banks in a Government office—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am very, very worried about you, Mr Spencer. You used to be such a calm and measured fellow. You are now behaving in an extraordinarily eccentric manner—almost delinquent. Calm yourself, young man, and your condition will improve.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about a food bank in a Government Ministry, which seems to suggest that in-work poverty is the problem in Britain.

The Trussell Trust handed out 1.6 million food parcels last year, half a million of which went to children. A new report out today by the End Child Poverty coalition shows that child poverty has risen by half a million and is becoming the new norm in this country. The End Child Poverty coalition called on Ministers to restore the link between inflation and social security. Will the Prime Minister do that, to try to reduce the disgraceful levels of child poverty in this country?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about helping those who are low paid. It is this Government—it is a Conservative Government—who introduced the national living wage. And what do we see? Under Labour, someone working full time on the national minimum wage would have taken home £9,200 a year. Now they take home over £13,700—£4,500 more under the Conservatives for the lowest paid. That is the Conservatives caring for the low paid in our society.

Jeremy Corbyn: They may have changed the name, but the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that child poverty will rise to over 5 million by 2022 at the current rate because of the strategies being followed by the right hon. Lady’s Government.

When the wealth of the richest 1,000 people in Britain has increased by £50 billion in one year, but there is not enough money to properly feed our children or pay workers a decent wage, we have failed as a society. This country is seeing the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, while the Government are in the pockets of a super-rich elite. More children in poverty, more pensioners in poverty, more people struggling to make ends meet: when are the right hon. Lady and her Government

going to reverse the tax giveaways to the super-rich and make sure they pay their fair share of taxes, so we can end the scandal—and it is a scandal—of inequality in modern Britain?

The Prime Minister: In fact, as I have pointed out, the top 1% are paying more in income tax today than they ever did under a Labour Government. But what have we seen from Labour in just the past week? The Labour party has a plan for a system where everybody in this country would get benefits. That means handouts to hedge fund managers paid for by tax hikes on working people. Labour's policy—money for the rich, paid by taxes on the poor.

Q6. [910906] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As already noted, 40 years ago, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister. During her premiership, she convinced people like me and people from modest backgrounds right across the country that it is the Conservative party that is the party of opportunity and aspiration. Does the Prime Minister agree that education plays a pivotal role in unlocking these opportunities and enabling social mobility, and will education and skills funding receive the attention it therefore deserves in the upcoming spending round?

The Prime Minister: Of course, we are already putting record levels of funding into our schools—£43.5 billion. My hon. Friend is trying to tempt me to talk about the spending review that is upcoming, but I can assure him that we are committed to improving education for every child, because I absolutely passionately believe that we should be making sure that how far a child goes in life depends not on their background, their circumstances or who their parents are, but on their individual talents and their hard work. Everybody in this country should be able to go as far as their talents and their hard work will take them.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in welcoming Mental Health Awareness Week.

Mr Speaker, pending your approval, we now know that the Prime Minister's three-times defeated Brexit deal will return yet again in June. Can the Prime Minister tell us: has a back-room agreement been reached with the Leader of the Opposition to sell out the people of Scotland and to force her shoddy deal through?

The Prime Minister: The only party that wants to sell out the interests of Scotland is the SNP, with its bid for independence.

Ian Blackford: I am not quite sure what that had to do with the question. You might at least try, Prime Minister, to answer the question. The people of Scotland are none the wiser about what is going on in the secret Tory-Labour talks. Scotland's people, and the will of the Scottish Parliament, are being ignored. Enough is enough. Why is the Prime Minister so afraid of giving the people of Scotland their say? The fact is, at the European elections next week the people of Scotland will make their voices heard, whether Westminster likes it or not. Next Thursday, the people of Scotland can vote SNP to stop Brexit and to send a clear message that Scotland will not be ignored any more.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the people of Scotland not knowing where things stand. Well, the people of Scotland will know where things stand if the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues vote for the withdrawal agreement Bill and ensure that we leave the European Union. If people want to vote for a party that not only is a Brexit party but is a party in government that can deliver Brexit, they should vote Conservative.

Q12. [910912] **Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): Can the Prime Minister confirm that, if we were to stay in a customs union and the single market, we would have to pay billions into the European Union, we could not do free trade deals around the world and we could not control our own immigration, and that we will never betray the promise that we made at the last general election that we will deliver the full Brexit—unlike the broken promises from the Labour party?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to confirm to my hon. Friend that we do indeed remain committed, and not just to delivering Brexit and to securing a majority in this House to do just that; I can reassure him on his specific points. In leaving the European Union, we want to—we will—end free movement, restore full control over our immigration policy, open up new trading opportunities around the world and end the days of sending vast payments to the European Union, and we will not pay for market access. He mentions commitments that were made at the last election. He and I both stood on a manifesto promising to deliver the best possible deal for Britain as we leave the European Union, delivered by a smooth, orderly Brexit, as we seek a new deep and special partnership, including a comprehensive free trade and customs agreement with the European Union. I am committed to those objectives. I believe that we have negotiated a good deal that delivers on those and I am determined to deliver it.

Q2. [910902] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): This Government say they are committed to tackling climate change, yet too often the evidence suggests otherwise. Take the examples of their support for an oil refinery in Bahrain but their refusal to help award-winning tidal energy specialists Nova Innovation. The reality is, 99.4% of UK export finance in the energy sector goes on fossil fuel projects. If this Government are serious about addressing the climate emergency, will they prove it by investing in the future, not the past?

The Prime Minister: We are investing in the future and not the past. That is why we have been encouraging issues like electric vehicles—the battery technology that is being developed here in the UK. The hon. Gentleman talks about our interest and our support for what we need to do on climate change. Just look at our record. Our renewable energy capacity has quadrupled since 2010; annual support for renewables will be over £10 billion by 2021; 99% of solar power deployed in the UK has been deployed under the Conservatives in government; and we have been decarbonising at a faster rate than any other country in the G20.

Q13. [910913] **Andrew Lewer** (Northampton South) (Con): It is vital for trust in the Prime Minister and the Government for dates to be set and then stuck to. Can we have a definitive and unalterable date for the release of the Green Paper on adult care?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to abide by, and will abide by, the Government's commitment to publish a Green Paper on adult social care. We want to ensure that, when we do that, we are able to bring forward proposals that deliver the answer, or possible answers, to the question we have to ask ourselves, which is how we can ensure that the social care system is sustainable into the future. We will be publishing it at the earliest opportunity and it will set out those proposals to ensure that the social care system is sustainable in the longer term.

Q4. [910904] Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I do not know about you, Mr Speaker, but it is looking a bit threadbare over on the Conservative Back Benches below the gangway. Maybe we should examine the reason why. The Government can barely secure double figures in the opinion polls. The UK is now an international laughing-stock, with the Prime Minister's Back Bench just wanting her going, as does the nation. She is now going to be bringing back her withdrawal agreement for a fourth tanking, as her Back Bench queue up to say they will not support her. Has the road now just run out, Prime Minister? For the sake of her nation, will she please just go—and let Scotland go too?

The Prime Minister: From the hon. Gentleman's references to those of us across this House, it is obvious that his charm offensive to become the next Speaker has already started. May I also say to him that it is in the interests of Scotland that it remains part of the United Kingdom, and in the interests of the whole of the United Kingdom that we deliver on what people voted for in the referendum and deliver Brexit?

Q14. [910914] Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): In Somerset, 15,200 children are now in good and outstanding schools compared with 2010—great news—but, despite 5.9% more funding per pupil going into Somerset, teachers and parents in Taunton Deane are increasingly coming to me to say that they are under funding pressures. They are in the fifth lowest for secondary school funding and the bottom third for primary school funding. Does the Prime Minister agree that to give our children the very best opportunity in life we must correct that funding injustice in Somerset? With a stronger economy overseen by this Government, we can and should do it.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments about the increasing number of children in Somerset in good and outstanding schools. It is indeed, as she says, our management of the strong economy that enables us to put more money into our public services, such as education. That is why we are putting a record level of funding into schools this year, giving every local authority more money for every pupil in every school. We have introduced the new funding formula to make distribution fairer across schools across the country. We want to keep on improving education for every child so that, as I said in response to an earlier question from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), we have the opportunity to ensure that every child can go on and achieve their full potential.

Q5. [910905] Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): As this is Mental Health Awareness Week, does the Prime Minister agree with the Labour party that it is time to

scrap tests for pre-teenage children, such as SATS and, in Kent, the 11-plus, which we know cause them to experience stress, anxiety and a sense of failure?

The Prime Minister: What is important as children go through their education is that we make sure they are receiving the right education for them and we make sure that schools are providing the right quality of education. Simple tests that enable judgments to be made about where children are in relation to their learning through their school career are, I believe, right. It is right that they were introduced and it is right that they continue.

Q15. [910915] Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is Mental Health Awareness Week and it is also exam time. At Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford, the staff and students care deeply about supporting all those with mental health issues. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister urge the Secretaries of State for Health and for Education to work together to provide a specific fund, so that our universities can develop new and innovative ways to help students with mental health pressures?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of mental health in universities. It is important and it is a priority for the Government. NHS England is already working closely with Universities UK, through the Mental Health in Higher Education programme, to build the capability and capacity of universities to improve student welfare services and access to mental health services. However, I am happy to ask both the Health and Education Secretaries to consider options to look at the issue further.

Q7. [910907] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister is now well aware that I have had the privilege of serving the people of Huddersfield for 40 years, but is she aware that when I came into this House I was a passionate Eurosceptic? I changed my mind because I saw how the European Union delivered prosperity, cleaned up the environment, and kept the peace and our security. That changed my mind about the value to all the people of this country, as well as my constituents, of staying in the EU. Is it not time that the Prime Minister spoke out on the truth about Europe, rather than the big lie of the UK Independence party?

The Prime Minister: This House voted for the referendum. The Government at the time said they would abide by the decision of the referendum. The people voted, the people made their choice, and it is right that the Government deliver on that choice and deliver Brexit.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned his coming into this House and that he has been serving his constituents for 40 years. He mentioned prosperity. Actually, in 1979 it was a Conservative Government that came in and turned around all the problems of a Labour Government and gave this country prosperity.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): On behalf of animal lovers across the country, may I congratulate the Prime Minister on introducing Lucy's law to stamp out the horrific and barbaric practice of puppy and kitten farming? However, this law applies only to England. With the Welsh consultation closing this week, does my

right hon. Friend agree that unless the SNP Government now act to introduce Lucy's law, there is a real risk of Scotland becoming a hub for unscrupulous puppy farmers? Scotland cannot be left behind.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I congratulate him on the work he did on this issue—he raised it regularly and championed the cause. It is ironic that, as an MP for a Scottish seat, he was able to help to change the law here in England and ensure it was brought in, yet the SNP Government in Scotland are not willing to change the law. It is time the SNP Government got on with the day job and started legislating for things that matter to people in Scotland.

Q8. [910908] **Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that it is her deal, no deal or no exit from the EU. We voted against her deal, and we voted against no deal for good reasons, but she has not shifted and she is out of time. Will she admit now that all that is left is no exit, or will she go back to the people?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady knows full well my response to the question about going back to the people. The people were given the choice as to whether we should stay in the European Union in the referendum in 2016. They voted, they gave their decision, and it is up to not just this Government but this House to respect the decision taken when we as a Parliament gave people that choice.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): At a crucial time, may I take this opportunity to highlight the absolutely vital importance of supporting British Steel and in particular its world-leading special profiles division at Skinningrove in my constituency? It is a profitable business and a jewel in the crown of UK steel making. I urge my right hon. Friend to deliver a productive outcome to the ongoing talks as swiftly as possible.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point about British Steel. Obviously, I cannot comment on the speculation about the future of Greycall Capital-owned British Steel. I realise this is a worrying time for those employed there and their families. As everybody across this House would expect, the Business Department is in regular contact with a wide range of sectors and companies. Of course, last month the Government entered into a commercial agreement with British Steel relating to its obligations under the EU emissions trading scheme, which has provided support to that company.

Q9. [910909] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Three weeks ago, the Prime Minister received a copy of the children's future food inquiry report, delivered to No. 10 by Dame Emma Thompson and six young food ambassadors who all experienced food poverty. The End Child Poverty coalition has found that, on her Government's watch, half a million more children are having their lives blighted by food poverty than at the start of this decade. Will the Prime Minister meet those young food ambassadors to discuss the #Right2Food children's charter as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: I have not seen the charter yet. I will look carefully at it, but, as I have said in response to a number of questions on this issue, what is important is that we have in this country an economy that enables people to get into good jobs. That is what we are delivering as a Conservative party in government. That is what enables people to have that stability in their income, and that is what enables people to be able to care for their children.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the final evaluation of the national bereavement care pathway, which found that nine in 10 parents who had suffered the loss of a child—[*Interruption*—felt they were treated sensitively and with respect? [*Interruption*.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has passed the test with flying colours.

Antoinette Sandbach: Not only did the hon. Lady pass the test; so too did the national bereavement care pathway. It also found that eight in 10 healthcare professionals felt supported to deliver good-quality bereavement care. Does the Prime Minister agree that these results are a rallying call to the remaining NHS trusts to adopt the care pathway and ensure that all bereaved parents receive better bereavement care?

The Prime Minister: I realise that this issue is close to the hearts of many Members across the House, including my hon. Friend's. She has spoken most movingly on this subject. I thank the all-party group on baby loss for all its work. We recognise that all bereaved parents should be offered the same high standard of care and support in an appropriate environment. These results show the benefit of the national bereavement care pathway. It has already helped to strengthen support for many bereaved families across the country, and I certainly urge all trusts to adopt this approach.

Q10. [910910] **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley) (Lab): We rightly condemn the denial or abuse of trade union rights in Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Colombia and many other countries, so will the Prime Minister agree that the victory by Unite trade union members, who won £1.9 million compensation after major construction firms unlawfully blacklisted and denied them work, is a victory for British values? Does she agree that free and independent trade unions are a valuable part of our democracy? Will she condemn the illegal actions of these construction companies? In an open democracy, will she guarantee trade union representatives a right of access to workplaces to speak to employees about their rights at work?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the important role that trade unions play in our democracy and the work that can be done with them to enhance workers' rights in this country. That is exactly what the Government are doing. We want to see workers' rights enhanced and improved and are already on track to do that. I look forward to our continuing to be able to do so in the future.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): A couple of weeks ago, I asked the Prime Minister about a family in my constituency who desperately needed the life-changing drug Spinraza. This morning we have the wonderful news that it will be made available in England. Will she

now press for a managed access agreement to be put in place as soon as possible, because the children who need this drug cannot afford to wait a single day longer?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raised a very important issue at the time, and I am very pleased that NHS England and Biogen have agreed a deal that enables NICE to recommend this revolutionary new treatment. As he said, it has the potential to transform the lives of young children with spinal muscular atrophy and their families, and I will certainly ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care acts on his request that it be made available as quickly as possible.

Q11. [910911] **Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Research by the “Victoria Derbyshire” show has revealed that in the last five years four children have been murdered following contact granted by the family courts to known abusers. This morning, more than 120 MPs wrote to the Justice Secretary calling for an independent inquiry into the treatment by the family courts of victims of domestic abuse and violence. Does the Prime Minister agree that there is something wrong with a system that forces contact between children and parents who are known risks to the child? If she does agree, will she commission that independent inquiry today?

The Prime Minister: The family courts system should never be used to coerce or re-victimise those who have been abused, and the child’s welfare must be the paramount consideration of the court in any proceedings. I am pleased that the president of the family division published new draft guidelines just last week that provided greater clarity on issues around the family courts, such as increasing transparency. The Ministry of Justice has not seen evidence to suggest a public inquiry is necessary, but I will ensure that the new Minister of State meets the hon. Lady to discuss the concerns she has raised.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Prime Minister congratulate the hard-working campaign team in Redditch who secured an increased majority on the borough council in the local elections earlier this month? Will she visit Redditch to find out how they are putting in place plans to unlock Redditch, and will she recommit her Government’s resources to the crucial issue of regenerating towns and high streets up and down the country?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate all those campaigners—those elected councillors—on their success in the Redditch Borough Council election, and I am pleased to see the council moving forward with its plans to improve the town. Certainly we remain committed: we have allocated sums to ensure that we see improvements in towns up and down the country, and we continue our commitment to that. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the invitation. I will ensure that my diary secretary is aware of it, and we will see whether it is possible.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My constituent Gerald Corrigan was shot with a crossbow outside his home on Good Friday. This weekend, he died of those severe injuries. I am sure that the House will join me in sympathising with his family, his partner and his friends.

The community is in shock. Will the Prime Minister join me in appealing to the public for any information that they may have, and to give that information to North Wales police in confidence? Will she assure me that, in view of the number of such incidents, the law on crossbows will be reviewed, and will she also ensure that the police have enough resources to conduct what is now a murder inquiry?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very worrying case, and, as he says, the thoughts of the whole House are with the family, friends and partner of his constituent. It is terrible to hear of an incident such as this. The Home Secretary has heard what the hon. Gentleman said about the law on crossbows, and I absolutely join him in encouraging any member of the public who has any information about what happened to get in touch with the police. There is, of course, the anonymous route, which enables people who may be concerned about giving information to the police to ensure that it reaches them without being identified. If anyone knows anything that could help the police to catch those responsible, I urge them to come forward.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): For more than 20 years I have worked with an incredible group of Conservatives in Wellingborough and Rushden. They raise money for the party, they deliver leaflets and they knock on doors, week in, week out. This Saturday, some 40 of us went out campaigning for the European elections.

Unfortunately, Sir, I have here a letter from those Conservatives, addressed to the Prime Minister. They say that her deal is worse than staying in the European Union, and that they want us to come out now on a no-deal basis. More importantly, Sir, they have lost confidence in the Prime Minister, and wish her to resign before the European elections. Prime Minister, what message have you for those dedicated and loyal Conservatives?

The Prime Minister: First, let me thank all members of the Conservative party across the country who campaign regularly in elections of all sorts. We have just heard about the group in Redditch Borough Council who succeeded in getting excellent results in the council election. I thank all those Conservatives for the time and effort that they put into promoting the Conservative cause.

Secondly, let me say to Conservatives up and down the country who are concerned about delivering Brexit that this is a Government who want to deliver Brexit, and have been working to deliver Brexit. Sadly, so far the House of Commons has not found a majority to do that. If everyone in the House of Commons had voted alongside the Government and the majority of Conservative Members of Parliament, we would already have left the European Union.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The people of Hornsey and Wood Green are completely distraught because a British Council worker, Aras Amiri, has been suddenly imprisoned in Iran. The Foreign Secretary is kindly having a meeting with me and the family on Friday, but will the Prime Minister please condemn this action by Iran, and will she please speak to President Rouhani urgently about this terrible situation?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, we are concerned. We are always concerned when any individual is sentenced purely on the basis of their employment with an entirely legitimate institution, as has happened in this case. It is utterly shocking, and I am deeply concerned by the turn of events. My thoughts are with the individual and her family at this time.

As the hon. Lady says, the Foreign Secretary is taking the issue up. The Government will press the case and the concerns that have been raised, but sadly the arrest of this individual shows Iran's attitude to entirely legitimate organisations that are trying to foster better relations and cultural understanding between countries.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The Prime Minister is rightly regarded by Scottish Conservatives as a trenchant

champion of the Union—and thank goodness for that. Does she agree that the UK shared prosperity fund is an opportunity to strengthen the Union? Will she confirm that the fund will be led by the needs of communities, and will not be Barnettised?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that we have an opportunity, with the shared prosperity fund, to ensure that we recognise the ways in which we can reduce disparities between communities and between the nations within the United Kingdom. As my hon. Friend said, it is absolutely right that that should be led by the needs on the ground. We should make sure that the money is spent effectively, and that it delivers for people. That is our intention.

Points of Order

12.46 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Forty-two years ago, in the early hours of the morning, a brave British soldier from 3 Company 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards was abducted or captured by the IRA. Captain Robert Nairac was my captain. He was a gentleman who, in the boxing ring, broke my nose—the first person to have done so. We still do not know what happened to him. The country owes a debt to our soldiers in Northern Ireland, and particularly to those who have given the utmost for their country. Mr Speaker, is there any way for me to mark 42 years since Captain Robert Nairac gave his life for this country and for the peace of Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the point of order, and I am minded to hear that of the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), if it is on a similar subject. I believe it to be.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am mindful of the respect that should be shown to the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). On 31 January, I sought and received an assurance from the Attorney General that any proposal that was brought forward to protect veterans would apply equally across the United Kingdom. In fact, he said it would be plainly wrong should it not apply equally. I am therefore perturbed to read in the press—and not hear in this House—that proposals brought forward to protect veterans from our country will not apply to Northern Ireland. Aside from the discourtesy to this House, it shows scant regard for people the length and breadth of the United Kingdom who stood to protect our interests, our values and our democracy. Mr Speaker, are you aware of any indication from the Defence Secretary that she intends to make an oral statement on the matter?

Mr Speaker: I will respond to that point of order before coming to others. I have not been advised of any imminent statement by the Secretary of State, or indeed any other Minister, but I have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. I recognise that this is a matter on which there are very strong feelings indeed. If he is dissatisfied with what he believes to be the Government's intention, and with the absence of any confirmatory oral statement to clarify the matter, it is open to him to seek to air that further in the Chamber by means that are well known to him.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP) *indicated assent.*

Mr Speaker: The nodding of the head in assent to my proposition by his right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), the leader of his party, is testimony to their recognition of what I am saying. If they want to return to the matter very soon, it is open to them to seek to do so.

I am very sensitive to the point that the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) has raised, but rather than giving an inevitably provisional and possibly unsatisfactory reply off the top of my head, I say to him that I am very open to the idea of

recognition in the way that he suggests. It seems to me that that warrants further discussion, and if he wants to come to see me, either alone or accompanied by colleagues—particularly if it is a cross-party delegation—I would be very open to seeing him and to exploring whether, and if so how, recognition might be provided. Meanwhile, I will of course take other points of order.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State for Defence announced overnight that she would introduce a Bill to bring in a 10-year statute of limitations on the kind of cases that we have been hearing about, but excluding those relating to Northern Ireland. Am I right in believing that that Bill would be amendable and that therefore, if the House chose to do so, we could bring Northern Ireland into it?

Mr Speaker: I have not seen the said Bill; I do not know whether it is yet drafted. I might be taking a modest risk in saying this, but with very few exceptions, Bills are amendable. Indeed, the concept of the unamendable Bill is by no means empirically proven. Sometimes people draft Bills in the hope that they cannot be amended, but their hope is usually dashed. I have no reason to suppose that a Bill of the type that the hon. Gentleman describes would be unamendable, and if it required a fertile mind, that would be no bar to the efforts and perspicacity of the hon. Gentleman.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Further to the point of order made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), Mr Speaker. Captain Nairac was posthumously awarded the George Cross, our highest civilian gallantry award. May I remind the House that he was tortured heinously for several hours, beaten up and hit with a wooden post. Eventually, an IRA terrorist killer came to him and said, "You've had it." Apparently, Robert Nairac then said very little except to ask for God's grace. He died in an incredibly gallant way, and I agree with you, Mr Speaker, that we should recognise the gallantry of this man.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. I was particularly interested to hear him develop his point fully, even though it was not entirely a point of order, out of respect for the track record of not only his political service but his military service, which is well known across the House and which itself has been marked by extraordinary professionalism, resilience and bravery.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I entirely concur with my hon. and gallant Friends, and I welcome your approach to recognising Captain Robert Nairac, who served with such distinction and who died in such appalling circumstances. As I understand it, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is going to make a written statement rather than an oral statement—[*Interruption.*] She is nodding; perhaps I have got that wrong. I should like to make the point, if I may, that this pursuit of 200 of our armed forces veterans for things that were allegedly done many years ago is totally unacceptable and it must end forthwith.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point with force and alacrity, and it will have been heard on the Treasury Bench. There is certainly no confirmation of the notion of a written statement, and he will have seen dissent from that proposition. I am aware that consideration has been given to a statement, but I think it would be seemly if we were to leave it there and await the development of events. I say in all courtesy to the hon. Gentleman, and I do not expect him to dissent from this, that I do not want to produce a ranking list today, but suffice it to say that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has in my experience been among the most courteous of members of the Government in keeping the Chair informed of her intentions and trying to do the right thing by the House. I have found her absolutely fastidious in that regard. Let us just wait to see how events unfold. I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said, and I respect the sincerity with which he said it, just as I respect his own background as a soldier, which I am sure has motivated him today.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am seeking your advice on an issue relating to my constituent, Sabir Zazai. Mr Zazai is to be honoured by the University of Glasgow for his service to civil society over the past 20 years. He is the chief executive officer of the Scottish Refugee Council. Understandably, he wishes his family to join him on that very special occasion but unfortunately Mr Zazai's father's visit visa has been refused. I have written to the Home Secretary about this matter, but his Department has unfortunately declined to intervene and referred my office back to UK Visas and Immigration, which has a 20 working day timeframe. The graduation is on 11 June, and the next opportunity for Home Office questions will not be until 3 June. Can you advise me of any other means or channels that I could use to raise this matter directly with the Home Secretary?

Mr Speaker: To a considerable extent, the hon. Gentleman has achieved his own salvation. He has aired the matter on the Floor of the House, and I rather imagine that the fact he has done so will quickly be communicated to the Government. If he is in any doubt on that point, he should try to ensure that his words are conveyed to UKVI sooner rather than later, and I would hope that some resolution can be achieved. The idea that the award should have to be deferred to some subsequent date naturally occurs, but it would be regrettable and I very much hope that he can achieve a speedy resolution to this matter. I quite understand why he wants this to happen, as anyone receiving such an award would naturally want to receive it duly accompanied.

WhatsApp Data Breach

12.56 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): After that significant and important point of order from the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), I would like to ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the WhatsApp data breach.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I am responding to this question from the shadow Secretary of State because the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is in Paris for the G7 Digital Ministers meeting. He is meeting political and digital leaders from across the world, including senior representatives of Facebook, which owns Whatsapp, to ensure that the technology that is an increasing part of our daily lives is developed and managed in a safe and ethical manner.

I share the concern of all Members of the House about WhatsApp's announcement of this vulnerability and the steps that it is taking to address it. In this instance, the National Cyber Security Centre has acted quickly to assess the risk to UK users and to publish guidance for our user base here in the UK. The NCSC has recommended that users protect their devices by installing updates as soon as they become available, and I would encourage any users with concerns to check the NCSC website. It is right that people should have confidence that their personal data will be protected and used fairly and lawfully.

The Data Protection Act 2018, which the Government passed last year, imposes strict obligations on organisations to ensure that UK citizens' data is processed safely, securely and transparently. Organisations that fail to comply with the legislation may be investigated by the Information Commissioner's Office, which received extra resources and more powers last year during the passage of that Bill. WhatsApp has designated the Irish Data Protection Commission as its European national regulator, and the ICO will work with and support its Irish counterpart so that the data of UK citizens is protected.

Cyber-security is of paramount importance to this Government, and our cyber-security strategy, which is supported by £1.9 billion of investment, sets out ambitious policies to protect UK citizens and businesses in cyber-space. Trust is the foundation of our digital economy. Cyber-security is absolutely vital in providing the stability and certainty that businesses need to thrive, and the public must have confidence in it.

Tom Watson: Here we are again: another day, another major data breach from a Mark Zuckerberg company. I am glad that the Secretary of State is with Facebook today, because we can suggest a number of questions for him to put to Facebook.

First, what has happened? Spyware called Pegasus, created by the Israeli security company NSO Group, has been used to hack the phones of lawyers and human rights activists. The news reports read like a nightmare: a dystopian world of tech-enabled total surveillance. The spyware transmits malicious code via a WhatsApp call. The target does not even need to answer the call for the phone to be infected. According to

The New York Times, once the spyware is installed, it can extract everything: messages, contacts, GPS location, email and browser history. It can even use the phone's camera and microphone to record the user's surroundings. That is terrifying.

About 1.5 billion people worldwide use WhatsApp and millions are here in the UK. Many of them will have been drawn to the service for its unique selling point: end-to-end encryption that ensures user privacy. Now we find that a gap in WhatsApp's defences has enabled complete violation of that privacy. What is the Minister doing to work with GCHQ, the National Cyber Security Centre and tech industry players to protect the UK's digital communications and privacy?

Media reports say that WhatsApp contacted the US Department of Justice earlier this month when it found out about the hack, but when was the Minister notified about it? When was the Information Commissioner informed? How many users in the UK are affected? Have those affected been notified? If the Minister does not know the answers, will she commit to updating the House when she does?

The spyware was licensed for export by the Israeli Government. What assurances can the Minister provide to social media companies that any digital surveillance products that the UK exports will not be misused to track and monitor human rights defenders? The particular vulnerability of WhatsApp was the voice over internet protocol—the process for receiving calls over the internet. As telecoms companies modernise, they are all moving away from calls over copper lines and phasing in calling via the internet. What is the Minister doing to ensure that those companies do not have vulnerabilities such as those we are discussing today?

The attack looks as if it was carried out by malicious actors, possibly other state actors, trying to close down journalists, dissidents, human rights activists and lawyers seeking justice, but exactly that kind of surveillance was given legal basis in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and I fought in the courts and won concessions on. The Government want tech companies to build back doors into their services, but this is an example of what happens if malicious actors find those doors: those who are fighting for justice and what is right come under attack. The Government must not allow that to happen.

Margot James: I share the shadow Secretary of State's outrage and shock at this latest development and I agree that such transgressions happen far too frequently. At the Paris summit, the Secretary of State has already raised his deep concern about the latest report with Nick Clegg, the head of global affairs and communications for Facebook—[*Laughter.*] I am sorry that hon. Members find that amusing, but he is the senior head of global affairs for Facebook. He sits on the main board and is therefore the appropriate person for my Secretary of State to raise this matter with at the outset.

Of course, I share the shadow Secretary of State's particular concern. WhatsApp is an encrypted service and therefore users are entitled to have even greater confidence in their privacy when they use it than when they use other social media platforms. The hon. Gentleman asked me what we are doing about it and when I was informed. I was informed of the breach, along with

everybody else, earlier this week. I will have to find out from my Secretary of State later today exactly when he was informed.

I share the hon. Gentleman's concern that the spyware was placed seemingly so easily on the WhatsApp service through using the phone contact part of it merely to call another number. That call, whether it was answered or not, meant that the spyware was installed directly on the user's device. It is extremely worrying.

We are fortunate in Britain to have the National Cyber Security Centre and GCHQ, which are across those matters daily. We recently published the third cyber-security strategy, which includes several cyber-defence measures that are taken routinely and constantly, and updated. They are designed to deter and disrupt adversaries, to develop critical capabilities in the UK and to address systemic vulnerabilities as soon as they are identified. I meet the NCSC executive reasonably regularly and I take my responsibilities for cyber-security from the Department's perspective extremely seriously.

I share the concern that a state could use this kind of attack to monitor human rights activists. That is deeply worrying. I am assured by the NCSC that we should all follow its current advice and that it is investigating the likelihood of any UK users being victims of the latest attack. As yet, I have no further information on that point to give to the House.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the incident reveals the evolving nature of the threat from cyber-space, and that the Government need to redouble their efforts across Government to work on the national cyber-security strategy, as well as to develop co-operative relationships with businesses, large and small, so that the threats can be robustly combated?

Margot James: My hon. Friend is right that the threat is evolving all the time and morphing from one aspect to another. It is therefore important that we keep business and citizens informed of what they can best do to protect themselves against the threats. As part of the national cyber-security strategy, we provide advice: the Cyber Essentials guide for businesses of all sizes and a small business guide on the NCSC website. The NCSC can provide tailored advice to companies when they are under a particular threat.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): This massive cyber-security breach underlines why we need to be part of the European institutions designed to tackle those issues. For example, leaving the European Defence Agency and its policies will make the UK substantially more vulnerable to cyber-attacks.

The Minister was asked about the timing of the information. The hack was discovered a month ago, so when exactly did the company alert the Government and the security services? Have the Government taken any action? The US Justice Department was apparently told last week. Have the security services ever used the Pegasus malware or similar spyware software? Do the Government have any contracts with the NSO Group, which in 2018 had revenues of \$251 million, or indeed with WhatsApp?

Margot James: In relation to our membership of the European Union and impending Brexit, as long as Britain leaves with a deal, preferably the deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated, we will have continued access on a smooth basis to much of that vital information.

The hon. Gentleman asks when the Government were informed. I answered that question in my reply to the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson). I was informed earlier this week, and I will find out from the Secretary of State when he was informed; I suspect he was informed earlier than I was.

On Pegasus and other types of malware, I can assure the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) that GCHQ and the NCSC ensure that this country has excellent, state-of-the-art malware detection systems in place at all times.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): People largely believed that as WhatsApp is encrypted, it is a safe app. Now we suddenly discover that perhaps it is not safe after all. This is deeply worrying and has caused deep unease in society. What is the Minister doing to restore public confidence in data protection? We have various Acts in place, but we have to restore that confidence. Can she give assurances that Mr Zuckerberg has fixed the flaw and will be brought to task?

Margot James: I will answer the questions that I can answer. I cannot speak for what Facebook and WhatsApp are doing, but I can assure my hon. Friend that, as part of the general data protection regulation across Europe, the Data Protection Act has put in place the strongest privacy standards, rules and laws anywhere in the world. In our Information Commissioner's Office we have the best resourced ICO in Europe, and we gave the commissioner enhanced powers last year. The ICO has shown itself to be superb in utilising those powers.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): This WhatsApp scandal demonstrates again that the Government's online harms White Paper is too little, too late, as it deals only with harms arising from user-generated content. What we need is a robust regulatory framework that assigns rights and responsibilities.

When a vulnerability is identified, as the Minister has said, it is essential to install an update as quickly as possible. Too many of our citizens still do not have access to fixed wireless broadband and will be obliged to install the update over a mobile network, incurring significant charges. Who should pay those charges?

Margot James: I reassure the hon. Lady that we already have robust legislation in place through the introduction of GDPR. We also have competition law and a number of agencies. Indeed, Opposition Members usually complain that we have too many regulatory bodies in this space. We have the Competition and Markets Authority, Ofcom and the Information Commissioner's Office, and we will be setting up a powerful regulator on the back of our online harms White Paper. People should be taking more responsibility for the security of their devices, and the NCSC has very good user advice on its website.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): No Government would find it easy to cope with the rapidly changing character of technology and its

associated protocols, and I congratulate the Minister on both her diligence and commitment. I am pleased that, as the former Minister responsible, I put in place the means and methods to deal with this issue in the form of the strategy and the NCSC. However, would she acknowledge that, for too long, we assumed that these big tech companies could be asked, not told; and requested, not obliged? We cannot be too tough in dealing with these matters, for at risk is the welfare of our citizenry and our nation.

Margot James: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his previous work. I strongly agree with his thesis that a voluntary approach of asking companies for their co-operation has not produced the needed change in a timely manner, which is exactly why in the White Paper we published last month we concluded that statutory regulation that places on companies a duty of care for their users, backed up by a powerful regulator, is the answer to these problems.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is absolutely delighted to have been congratulated by the Minister on the delivery of his thesis, as he is of a notable academic and, some would say, even philosophical bent.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Following this very serious WhatsApp security breach, what assurances can the Minister provide that social media companies in the UK will ensure that the products they export cannot be misused to track or monitor human rights activists and others who might themselves subsequently face human rights abuses? Can she also inform the House specifically whether any MP has been targeted?

Margot James: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that assurance, but I can say that the early investigations point to this being a highly targeted attack. As I said earlier, the NCSC is investigating whether UK citizens, including Members of this House, might have been the butt of the attack. We await further information on that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is somewhat ironic that the former Home Secretary tried to get WhatsApp to overcome its security so that, for national security purposes, we could access messages.

What messages have been given to British aid workers working overseas and to people working in human rights environments who may be vulnerable to attack if WhatsApp messages are leaked? Surely they should be given a very strong message not only to upgrade but to be very cautious about their use of WhatsApp until this problem is fixed.

Margot James: I agree with my hon. Friend that such attacks undermine the confidence of users, which is why it is in the interests of manufacturers to make sure that security is much more heavily designed into their software products and devices before they are released to the consumer.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The 1.5 billion WhatsApp users worldwide—millions of them here in the UK—have been attracted by its end-to-end

encryption and the guarantee that their messages are secure, but they are relying on old-fashioned media to find out about this breach and to be told to update devices. What conversations has the Minister or the Secretary of State had with WhatsApp to prompt it to alert users to update the app? At the moment, I fear that many of the millions of WhatsApp users here in the UK will not have updated their app, and they should do so urgently.

Margot James: I agree with the hon. Lady that on hearing about this—it is ironic that people have to hear about it through traditional print media and television—they really should update WhatsApp. People should get into the habit of installing security updates whenever they are prompted to do so by an app, and they should do it proactively. It is easy to visit the app store and select all updates, which is a routine security precaution that users should take.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): This is obviously a very serious data breach, as acknowledged on both sides of the Chamber. Of course, the recent Data Protection Act enhances the powers of the Information Commissioner's Office, which could implement a fine of up to 4% of global revenue. Facebook's revenue last quarter was over £16 billion, which could go quite a long way to helping cover the costs of our security services in countering the challenges in the digital space. Does the Minister believe that a fine would be appropriate in these circumstances?

Margot James: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding the House of the significant powers that the ICO now has. Of course, the powers are there to enforce and protect the privacy of UK users. It remains to be seen whether UK users have been affected by this breach but, if they have, I am sure the ICO will make further inquiries.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I declare my interest, as set out in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I am sure the Minister will want to encourage the increasing number of her colleagues who have their own budding leadership WhatsApp groups to update their app. My hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) made an important point that this is not only about encryption but about the connection between devices and the transition from the old copper cables to the VoIP system of broadband connectivity. This is a question for Ofcom, not the ICO, so what conversations is the Minister having with Ofcom about the security standards for connections over the internet-based communications network?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Gentleman for quite rightly raising the role of Ofcom. I have regular meetings with the chief executive of Ofcom, and I will certainly raise the matter the hon. Gentleman has raised with me at my next meeting with her.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am afraid the Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) was less than convincing. The reality is that WhatsApp is a critical app that is used in everyday life by millions

of people across the UK. It is therefore of national importance that its resilience is protected, and the state has an interest in making sure that that happens. Why is the Minister not compelling WhatsApp to ensure that all users in the United Kingdom are alerted to the potential data breach and are obliged to upgrade the software accordingly?

Margot James: I think that that is precisely the content of the discussion my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has had with Facebook just this morning. I agree with the hon. Gentleman: WhatsApp and any other platform where there has been a serious breach of this kind should take responsibility for informing its entire user base immediately. I completely concur with that.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There will be millions of people with a serious concern that their data—their conversations with loved ones and business contacts—has been stolen by this spyware, and they will want to know that someone is being held accountable. Does the Minister now agree that it is time to add Government pressure to the pressure from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee to have Mark Zuckerberg come to Parliament to explain what has gone wrong with Facebook and WhatsApp, and to make sure we can restore some public trust in him and his company?

Margot James: It is vital that we hold platforms—in this case, WhatsApp—to account for breaches that have occurred. If these breaches have resulted in UK users' data being compromised, the ICO has the powers to investigate them thoroughly. It also has a sanctions regime, which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) pointed out includes a potential fine of up to 4% of global turnover. The ICO has proved itself to be a forceful regulator, and I am sure it will be watching this space with great interest.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Although we know that data breaches have happened previously, the difficulty is that we have had no adequate response from Facebook since evidence of those data breaches came through. Is not the reality that we have to have legislation in place? We are now in an election period, with WhatsApp and closed Facebook groups being used, as we speak, in electoral campaigning, but the law has not changed since the DCMS Committee, on which I serve, raised these issues. We have yet another instance of shutting the door after the horse has bolted. We have to act, and the Cabinet Office and the Select Committee need, as a matter of urgency, to take forward steps relating to the electoral position, which is so vulnerable and about which we will learn nothing before polling day next Thursday.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman raises a subject that is top of my priority list at the moment. My Department works with the Cabinet Office on making our electoral laws fit for the internet age. As he made clear, there is a huge requirement in terms of updating, and I have read the Select Committee report, which is extremely alarming. The ICO is undertaking a number of investigations into matters of concern around our democracy and the security of our democracy. I advise all Members to have a good look at the ICO website,

[Margot James]

where they should find a draft political code of practice—which the ICO has developed under the powers handed to it under the Data Protection Act last year—with advice to political parties on how they use social media platforms and the data available to them from those platforms. It is a very serious matter.

Bob Blackman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have just looked at the version history of the WhatsApp advice on what to update. There is no mention whatever of security breaches or the need to update WhatsApp because of security. The advice talks about having stickers in full size, entering phone numbers and seeing who is on WhatsApp. There is nothing about security.

Mr Speaker: I note what the hon. Gentleman has said, and it will have been heard by Members of the House, who may well share his reaction to it. I thank him for taking this opportunity to put the matter on the record.

Speaker's Statement

1.25 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the next urgent question, I must inform the House that Dr Andrew Murrison has written to me giving notice of his wish to resign from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I therefore declare the Chair vacant. In doing so, I hope the whole House will want to join me in appreciation of the work of Dr Murrison in chairing the Select Committee with great commitment and skill. Moreover, colleagues will be aware that he has left the Chair of the Committee because he has returned to the service of the Executive. He has become a Minister again, and he was performing from the Treasury Bench yesterday at Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions. We wish him well in the execution of his important new responsibilities and congratulate him on his success.

The following will be the arrangements for electing a new Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Nominations should be submitted in the Lower Table Office or the procedural hub by 5 pm on Monday 10 June. Following the House's decision of 4 July 2017, only members of the Conservative party may be candidates in this election. Colleagues will understand why that is so, but for the benefit of those attending our proceedings who are not Members of the House, that is because of the distribution of Chairs between the parties. This particular Committee has been designated for a Conservative Chair in this Parliament. If there is more than one candidate, the ballot will take place on Wednesday 12 June from 10 am to 1.30 pm in Committee Room 16. A briefing note with more details about this election will be made available to Members.

Learning Disabilities Mortality Review

1.27 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the learning disabilities mortality review.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I would like to start by restating our commitment to reducing the number of preventable deaths among those of our population with a learning disability and to addressing the persistent health inequalities that they experience. It is completely unacceptable that people in our country with a learning disability, and indeed autism, can expect a shorter life than the population as a whole.

Each and every death that might have been prevented is an absolute tragedy, and we must not compound that tragedy by failing to learn any lessons we can that might improve the care that is provided in the future. That is why the Government asked NHS England in the first place to commission the learning disabilities mortality review programme, known as LeDeR. The principle behind it is a relentless determination to learn from these deaths and to put in place changes to the way care is organised, provided and experienced, to make a real difference locally and nationally. It means challenging often deep-rooted, systematic or cultural issues that have existed for decades. It is driven by the fact that we are clear that the quality of care offered to people with a learning disability sometimes falls very short of the standards we expect, and that is simply not good enough. The existence of the LeDeR programme testifies to our commitment to address this issue so that people with a learning disability can access the best possible care and support. The annual reports published by the LeDeR programme and the recommendations it makes are all part of this.

Over the weekend, the media reported on the findings of a draft of the third annual LeDeR report, which is due to be published shortly. In making this statement, I would like to record my deep regret at this apparent leak. It is also a regret that Her Majesty's Opposition should table an urgent question based on leaks and, indeed, that the Speaker's Office should see fit to grant it. More generally, the House—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister will resume her seat. Forgive me, but I was being approached by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

I have the highest regard for the Minister, who is always a person of the utmost courtesy. She can have an opinion about the decision of a Member to apply for an urgent question; it is not for a Member on the Treasury Bench to seek to offer a judgment on the way in which the Speaker discharges his responsibilities as Speaker. I have made a judgment that this matter warrants the attention of the House, and that judgment is not to be argued with or contradicted by a Member of the House. The Minister's duty is to come to the House and answer the question, but do not argue the toss with the Chair. That is the wrong way to behave.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you for clarifying that, Mr Speaker. I do not dispute that this is absolutely the right place and time to discuss this very important issue,

but more broadly I think that Members across the House need to take a clearer view on how we discuss and view leaks, and to take a more consistent approach to that, because in recent weeks we have seen leaked information discussed in a very different way in the House.

Mr Speaker: I understand. I hope I heard the hon. Lady correctly and I think I heard her correctly. She said what she said, and I am happy that she has offered that clarification or explanation of her thinking. I have no desire to have any argument with her about the matter. The issue is what needs to be aired, rather than the procedural question, but she has said what she has said on that, and I am sure she will now want to attend to the specifics of the inquiry.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

With regard to the LeDeR programme, I have committed in the past and will commit once again to bringing the final report before Parliament on the day of publication, which we are told by NHS England will be in the next few weeks. Members will feel as concerned as I do about some of the things in the report that have been leaked, and I will be happy to discuss the more detailed information when the report is fully published.

Barbara Keeley: Well, this is a mess, isn't it? Last year, the first report from this important review was sneaked out on a Friday, in the middle of the local election results, and this year we have read about it through leaks to *The Sunday Times* and the *Health Service Journal*. The Minister says that it is a draft that is going to be published shortly; I understand that the authors handed it over on 1 March. How long does it take the Department to turn round a draft? Clearly, somebody somewhere thinks it should be out there, because somebody somewhere is leaking it. Will the Minister take responsibility for this process and ensure that future reports are published in a timely manner? I am not happy with "shortly" or "in a few weeks"; will she tell us when the full copy of the report—not just what was leaked, first in the Sunday papers and now in the *Health Service Journal*—will be available?

It appears from the leak that the review has been able to consider only a quarter of the premature deaths reported to it, leaving more than 3,000 families waiting for closure—it is those 3,000 families on whom we should be focusing—and that well over a third of cases do not even have a reviewer assigned to them. That shows that, as we suspected last year, the LeDeR programme is significantly under-resourced, so will the Minister pledge now to ensure that the review has the resources it needs in future?

Last year, the Government made 24 specific commitments relating to the annual report, and 15 of them were due to be completed by now. Will the Minister update the House on the progress on those commitments?

The leak tells us that the review found that in 8% of cases the care given

"fell so short of good practice that it significantly impacted on their wellbeing or directly contributed to their cause of death".

What is the Minister doing now to ensure that no more people with learning disabilities die early because of poor care?

[Barbara Keeley]

Lastly, and most disgracefully—I am certainly going to mention this from the leaked report—the report says that over a period of two years, at least 19 people with learning disabilities who died had “learning disabilities” or “Down’s syndrome” given as the reason not to resuscitate them. A patient having a learning disability or Down’s syndrome is not a reason to put a “do not resuscitate” order on their care. Does the Minister agree that such an approach, if it exists, smacks of eugenics and is completely unacceptable? What action will she take to ensure that it does not continue?

Caroline Dinanage: This is not a mess; the Department of Health and Social Care requested that NHS England commission the whole LeDeR programme. The report is an independent document, which is very important because we are talking about people’s lives and about deaths that could have been prevented. It is really important that the work is done by an independent group and that it is carefully scrutinised, and that that scrutiny and work to look at the recommendations—[*Interruption.*] If the shadow Minister would like to bob up and ask some questions, I will happily answer them, but if she is going to keep murmuring from a sedentary position, I will not be able to address anything that she says.

It is so important to do this process in an independent way, because we are talking about people’s lives. NHS England says that the LeDeR report has not been published yet because it contains some serious recommendations, as have other such reports, and NHS England needs to make sure that the correct people will be responsible for implementing those recommendations and that the document can be scrutinised in the correct way before it is published. I understand that the shadow Minister is always keen to get things published as quickly as possible, and not always with the benefit of their being done as thoroughly as possible, but in this case we will not be pushed. This is an independent document and I cannot control when it will be published, but the shadow Minister can rest assured that when it is published, I will be happy to answer any questions that arise from it.

Members will feel, as I do, that recent press reports are a clear indication that we need to do more on this, and I assure the House that we recognise that. The LeDeR programme confirms how seriously we take the issue of premature mortality and differences in life expectancy. We will continue to work with partners across Government and throughout the health and social care system to consider any recommendations that improve care for people with learning disabilities and autism and address the shameful inequalities that they experience. Everybody has a right to expect effective, compassionate and dignified care. If someone has a learning disability, their expectations should be no different.

I have already stated that I do not intend to comment on the specifics of the leaked bits of the document, which is independent and has not yet been published. However, like other Members, I am particularly concerned about any suggestion that doctors have recorded learning disability or Down’s syndrome as the reason for a “do not attempt cardio-pulmonary resuscitation” order—a DNACPR, as they call it. People with a learning disability

have exactly the same right to enjoy a meaningful life as everyone else, and their disability should never, ever be used as an acceptable reason for a “do not resuscitate” order. We are taking immediate steps to ensure that doctors are reminded of their responsibilities and avoid any form of discrimination. [*Interruption.*] The shadow Minister says from a sedentary position that doctors should not need reminding. That is the whole point of commissioning the LeDeR review. Sometimes there are systematic or cultural ways of going about things in everyday life, whether in the medical profession or anywhere else, that mean people are not treated with the dignity and respect that they deserve. The whole point of the LeDeR review is to learn from every single preventable death and to make sure that no one else suffers in the same way.

The LeDeR programme published its second annual report in May 2018, and the Government’s response, which we published in September 2018, set out a range of actions for the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England and other national partners to help to reduce premature mortality and improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities. Many of those actions have now been completed—for example, we recently closed our consultation exercise on plans to introduce mandatory training in learning disability and autism awareness for health and care staff, and we will set out plans to move forward on that later in the year.

The latest report will no doubt reinforce what we already know: that the Government and our health and care system need to do more to ensure that people with a learning disability receive good-quality, informed and safe care. There has been a significant improvement—there has been a tenfold increase in the number of LeDeR review cases that have been covered, the backlog has improved, and in 2018-19 NHS England invested an additional £1.4 million to support the local teams to accelerate the process, as well as to train 2,100 experts to carry out reviews. The process is new, but we are pushing forward and putting in the necessary resources to make sure that we deliver on time. The LeDeR programme is there to help to achieve what we have set out, which is to make sure that those with a learning disability should never expect to receive worse health outcomes. We will respond to the full version of the report as soon as it is published.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I share the concern of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and the Minister about the fact that it appears that at least 19 patients had “do not resuscitate” orders specifically because of their learning disabilities. I welcome the fact that the Minister has made it clear that there will be an immediate notice to remind clinicians that that should never be a reason to not resuscitate a patient. May I ask her to go further, though? My understanding is that doctors should make “do not resuscitate” decisions only after a full discussion with their patient. It appears that, in these cases—without wishing to prejudge them—a doctor has made that decision without having had that discussion. Will the Minister also make it clear in her communication that the assumption should be that someone with a learning disability is just as capable of making these difficult decisions as everyone else? Their lives are worth as much as everyone else’s. That should be the assumption of everybody working in the national health service.

Caroline Dineneage: My right hon. Friend makes a perfect point. As I have said, I will not go into the details of the report—the independent report—that have been leaked and that have not yet been published. However, we are very clear that treatment decisions must be based on objective information and should never, ever be based on assumptions about a person's quality of life. We are very clear that a learning disability should never be used as a reason for a “do not resuscitate” notice. We will take steps to remind doctors of their responsibilities to ensure that they provide the same level of care for people with a learning disability as they do for others. He is absolutely right to point out that family members' and personal opinion should always be taken into consideration and that no one's life should ever be undervalued in this way.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on securing this urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, on granting it. This is a mess. The Minister talked about the training that is expected to happen. Will she set out when the autism and learning disability training, on which this Government have recently consulted, will come into effect?

Caroline Dineneage: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. This very thorough consultation has received more than 5,000 responses. It has very recently concluded, and we are now going through those consultation responses, some of which are quite detailed. We hope to respond in the next two or three months to set out how we would like to move forward on this.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): This question is similar to the “do not resuscitate” one. I am aware that a number of practitioners use seclusion, segregation and restraint against patients in the system. What is the Minister doing to stop that happening?

Caroline Dineneage: This is really important. We have seen an increase in reports of segregation and restraint, but that is partly because we have seen much better recording of the data. That is also very important, because we need to understand where people are being kept in seclusion or restrained inappropriately. The Secretary of State has asked the Care Quality Commission to review the matter and make recommendations about the use of restrictive interventions in settings that provide all sorts of residential care. The first part of that review will be reporting back very shortly.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I welcome the Minister's clear statement that it is wholly unacceptable that people with learning disabilities continue to experience much shorter life expectancy. It is wholly unacceptable, but the problem is that we have all been saying this for years and nothing ever changes. We do not appear to be capable of learning the lessons that she says are necessary. One problem is that people with learning disabilities are often under the care of people who do not have the training necessary to understand the interaction between physical health conditions and learning disability. That is often the cause of that premature mortality. I brought together a group of clinicians who make the case for a new specialty in learning disability so that we have people who understand those crucial interactions between

physical ill health and learning disability. Will the Minister meet me and those clinicians so that we can really understand how we can start to make a difference here rather than continuing to say that it is unacceptable and doing nothing effective about it?

Caroline Dineneage: I start by saying that I am always very happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman because he has great expertise, knowledge and understanding of this field and often makes incredibly valuable suggestions. In response to his question, that is why the commitment to mandatory training for all health and care staff is absolutely vital. We should not forget that this is not just about medical professionals, but about people such as receptionists. The way that adults with learning disabilities and autism are treated by someone at the front desk of a health and care setting can immeasurably affect their interaction with that provider. That is why this training is so important, why we have consulted so widely on how to deliver it, and why we will set out some really coherent plans later on in the year.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): May I for one thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the House of Commons to turn the spotlight on people with learning disabilities? We should never miss an opportunity to talk about a part of our population whose problems are often swept under the carpet. That applies particularly to people with Down's syndrome. We must proclaim that, in this country, there are no second-class citizens whatever disability a person might have, including Down's syndrome. There are some countries, for instance Iceland, where there is virtual genocide—there is a 100% abortion rate for Down's syndrome. Will the Minister proclaim now from the Dispatch Box that, if a person has Down's syndrome, they are just as valued, just as loved, and just as cared for by society as anybody else?

Caroline Dineneage: I do not think I could have said it any better than my right hon. Friend. Mencap has put out a fantastic tweet featuring a particularly special young man who has Down's syndrome. He is incredibly brilliant in the way that he articulates how very proud he is to live with Down's syndrome and to be just as useful, just as important and just as special as everybody else, and how that makes him just as much a valued member of society as others—in fact probably more so.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is six years since Connor Sparrowhawk died, yet these leaks—yes, leaks—indicate that 8% of the cases reviewed showed that people with learning disabilities had been harmed or even killed by the care that they received. What was meant to be helping them was actually harming them. That raises enormous questions, of course, about all the cases that have not been reviewed. The Minister said that action is being taken to deal with the backlog, but she knows that it is enormous. She must also know that the time that elapses after a death really counts for the amount of learning and the amount of change that will follow. Will she tell us exactly what she is doing to speed up the review of these cases, as it is just so important?

Caroline Dineneage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the case of Connor Sparrowhawk, which was an absolutely tragic lack of care. I have met his mum, Dr Sara Ryan, and I greatly value her feedback on how

[*Caroline Dineneage*]

we move forward with the LeDeR programme, because she has such an important insight into the matter. As I have said, NHS England is putting in additional funding to clear the backlog, and the NHS planning guidance for 2019-20 is very clear that clinical commissioning groups must have robust plans in place to make sure that LeDeR reviews are undertaken within six months of a notification of death in their local area. The resources are going in and the guidelines are there to ensure that that happens.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I must declare an interest: my sister was born with profound learning disabilities. Later this year, hopefully, she will celebrate her 60th birthday. During my lifetime, I have seen far too many young people with learning disabilities die premature deaths. One of the biggest problems is when they suffer a physical problem and have to go to A&E, or through the primary care system. If a doctor or surgeon diagnoses that individual, part and parcel of the communication is talking to them and getting a response. People with profound learning disabilities cannot do that, so doctors often issue DNRs—I have personal experience of this—on people who are perfectly capable of having a perfectly good quality of life. Can my hon. Friend ensure that individuals who have profound disabilities have a named person from the health service who will give advice before any such decisions are made?

Caroline Dineneage: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his impassioned plea; he makes an excellent point. We have spoken quite comprehensively today about how important it is that people with learning disabilities are never written off as a “do not resuscitate”, because that is absolutely wrong. I can tell him—I think he will find this useful—that we have introduced annual GP health checks for people with a learning disability to help to recognise these health inequalities, so that some long-term health conditions can be picked up much earlier and diagnosed more quickly, and prevention can be put in place much sooner.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I wonder if the Minister recognises that for many families the review feels like the NHS marking its own homework, and that there needs to be more of an independent body to look at all the cases to give the reassurance that those families want.

Caroline Dineneage: I do recognise what the hon. Lady is saying. It is difficult to know how best to analyse something as tragic as a death—how to bring forward all the relevant expertise. That is why NHS England works with the University of Bristol on this programme. It is a very new programme—the report to be published shortly will only be the third one—and we are always open to ways in which it can be improved and seen to be more independent, more thorough and to make more difference.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the review and understand the Minister’s reluctance to comment on rumours and leaks, but as a point of principle does she agree that access to specialist services

and care, as well as early and accurate diagnosis, is really important and should be consistently applied across the country? Will she therefore assure me that people with learning disabilities in Worcestershire will receive the same good service as people elsewhere in the country—in Birmingham or London, for example?

Caroline Dineneage: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that nobody with a learning disability, autism or any other condition should expect to receive worse care. Everybody should expect the same level of quality care, no matter who they are or where in the country they live. That is what we are working towards, and learning from deaths is a key element of helping to deliver that aim.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the Minister condemn “do not resuscitate” instructions based on a person having a learning disability, but surely this situation is not a matter of mild neglect requiring a reminder letter; this is a grave abuse of power perpetrated on some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Does it not require disciplinary action?

Caroline Dineneage: The hon. Gentleman has partly tapped into my frustration with the fact that I am here today commenting on leaks of a report that has not yet been published, rather than on the full report, which, when it comes out, will provide clear recommendations as to how we can move forward on this matter. As I have said, we are already writing to reinforce the message that should be self-evident—that learning disabilities should never be a reason for a “do not resuscitate”. When the report is finally published, it will include a very well-considered recommendation as to how we tackle this issue in a way that will ensure that this situation will never happen in future.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Thank you for allowing this urgent question, Mr Speaker. We should acknowledge that those with learning disabilities have not had their fair share of parliamentary time, and this review into learning disabilities mortality will be a matter of huge concern to them, their friends and their families. The Minister says that resources are going into the review. Will she confirm that a review will be allocated to everybody who has reported a death, and that the impact on access to care for people with learning disabilities from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds is being specifically considered?

Caroline Dineneage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to have much more discussions like this in this place because health inequalities need to be addressed and we need to be outspoken about them. The whole point of asking NHS England to commission this review is to think about how we address the most severe of these inequalities, which is when people die early or in a way that might have been preventable. We want to ensure that every single death of a person with a learning disability—whether or not people regard that it was preventable from the outset—is looked at very carefully. People should always have that reassurance, regardless of where they live and what kind of socioeconomic background they come from.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Vaccinations are one of the best ways to protect health and reduce mortality, and I was pleased that the Government pledged to increase the uptake among people with learning disabilities. Will the Minister update the House as to what progress she is making with that Government pledge?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is right that vaccinations are very important. We have introduced the annual health check for people with learning disabilities because it is an opportunity for them to have a one to one with their GP to check that all things such as vaccinations are up to date, but also to see whether there are any other long-term health issues that have not yet been spotted. I speak about this from an entirely selfish point of view because a dear friend of mine—my self-appointed best friend, who was one of my constituents—very sadly died last year from a form of cancer that would have been curable had her case been picked up earlier. That is why health checks for people with learning disabilities are vital.

Point of Order

1.55 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday's news that the Government are drawing up secret contingency plans for a potential British Steel collapse will have come as a shock to thousands of British steelworkers, who have worked against the odds to defend the company's future, and to many across the industry. Today 4,500 jobs are at risk, as well as thousands more across the supply chain. Mr Speaker, could you please advise me whether the Government have indicated that they will update the House on this urgent matter? If not, what advice can you give me to encourage them to do so?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I have had no indication that a statement is certain, but I have had an indication that a statement is very likely in the near future—that is to say, in a small number of days. It is not inconceivable that that could be tomorrow; I am not expecting or predicting that, but it could be. If not, I have every confidence that the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will want to come to the House early next week on the assumption that he is in a position to provide meaningful information to the House.

The Secretary of State has been solicitous in his dealings with the Chair. I have been kept in the picture on this matter and I have judged it right to await a ministerial initiative at this stage. The Secretary of State is well informed about parliamentary processes, and has antennae that are attuned to the will of the House. If, therefore, nothing were forthcoming but the matter were of continuing concern to Members, they would seek to raise it in the House and I would be respectful of that wish. By one means or another, this matter will be aired in the Chamber within a few days. Of that, I am very confident. I hope that is helpful to the hon. Lady and to other colleagues who are interested in this matter.

Trade Union (*Access to Workplaces*)

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

1.58 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to remove certain restrictions on trade unions conducting business in workplaces; and for connected purposes.

Article 11 of the European convention on human rights states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests”,

or her interests. At present, there are almost 6.5 million trade union members in the UK, making trade unions this country’s largest voluntary and democratic organisations. Trade unions are on the frontline every day, fighting poverty, inequality and injustice, and negotiating a better deal for working people. Their role has never been more critical than it is today, as in-work poverty is on the rise and zero-hours contracts are widespread. British workers face an uncertain and exploitative job market, while it is boom time for large multinational companies.

I have spoken to union officials who have been prohibited by companies like McDonald’s from efforts to unionise their workforce. Employees have been banned from visiting other McDonald’s stores. Union members from the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union have recounted stories like that of Mohamed, a worker from north London, who was excited at the prospect of working alongside his colleagues to improve basic things at work, like getting his shifts 10 days in advance so that he can plan his life. Because of these efforts, he was informed by the management that he is banned from every McDonald’s store in the area. Union staff visiting McDonald’s across the UK to speak to workers about the benefits of joining a trade union are being routinely thrown out of stores and having their presence reported to senior regional managers.

Workers at Amazon have reported shift patterns being interrupted and randomised simply to prevent staff from talking to union officials on the way into work. In a members’ survey of workers conducted by the GMB, one Amazon worker described employment there as like “living in a prison”. The strict targets that are imposed on staff mean that 70% feel as though they are given disciplinary points unfairly, while 89% believe that they are being exploited. In its recently published report on InterContinental Hotels Group, Unite documented a culture of fear and bullying, with management pressurising low-paid staff into working for eight to 10 days straight. IHG employees and subcontracted employees have been routinely denied the right to freedom of association and have stood little chance of exercising their right to collective bargaining. Union members are vulnerable and live in fear of reprisals from their employer.

Bupa is one of largest and highest-profile providers of residential social care in the UK and part of an international health group that serves approximately 32 million customers in 190 countries. It consistently refuses to allow Unison officials access to workplaces to

speak to staff and members regarding union rights and representation. During 2017 and 2018, Unison North West regional officers were banned from every Bupa work location, despite assurances that visits could be conducted at the employer’s convenience and with due regard to operational and safeguarding concerns and priorities. In a sector where shift work and long hours are prevalent, and where many care workers also have significant caring responsibilities at home, the workplace is often the only place for the union to engage with workers. Bupa’s denial of access in this case is effectively a refusal by the employer to allow workers to organise a union.

I could go on: I have heard countless stories like these from union officials. As long as these practices are widespread, this country’s commitment to the human right to form and to join a trade union is hollow and meaningless. Why are our democratic trade unions being treated in this way, and why is the human right to join and form trade unions being denied? In part, it is because under current legislation there are no rights of workplace access for trade unions. In the words of one IHG union member:

“In order to exercise our basic human right to freedom of association, workers in the UK need our employers to provide facility time and a space within our workplaces for reps and members to meet and discuss work related issues.”

This is not a far-fetched, unrealisable demand—it is achievable, and I hope that my Bill can achieve it.

In New Zealand, under its Employment Relations Amendment Act 2018, unions have far greater access to workplaces. Workers can speak to union reps visiting the sites. The company provides a space for the union and worker to meet and pays the worker for a reasonable amount of time with their union rep. This, in turn, leads to higher union membership, higher wages, and more just and fair workplaces. Trade unions in the workplace are normalised, leading to a less adverse attitude to working people’s right to represent themselves. Under this legislation, all that is required is that the union provides a short period of notice that they will be visiting the site, allowing management to add the extra staff member required for the duration of the visit. This means that there is no disruption to the business while ensuring that workers’ legal and human right to join and form a union is adhered to. New Zealand’s Employment Relations Amendment Act has restored protections for workers, especially vulnerable workers, and strengthened the role of collective bargaining in the workplace.

If we are to transition away from a low-wage, precarious economy, increasing the collective bargaining power of workers is critical. It is a myth that strong trade unions drive down profit—I emphasise that point. A happy, well-respected workforce is also a productive workforce. I know this from my own experience as a union rep at NatWest. Being able to represent and support my colleagues gave me a clear sense of the value of strong union representation in the workplace. My colleagues felt valued and supported, and as a result provided an efficient, professional service. That is what trade unions are all about: bringing people together to work towards a common goal. The stories I have heard from union officials paint the opposite picture: too many British workers feel exploited and dispensable. By expanding trade union access to workplaces, we can restore dignity

and respect at work, and put an end to the exploitation and misery we see on the rise today. We need strong trade unions and a better deal for working people.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Faisal Rashid, Laura Pidcock, Ian Lavery, Caroline Lucas, Grahame Morris, Chris Matheson, Ruth Smeeth, Justin Madders, Helen Goodman, Danielle Rowley and Angus Brendan MacNeil present the Bill.

Faisal Rashid accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 391).

Education

2.7 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I beg to move,

That the draft Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Further Implementation etc.) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 29 April, be approved.

It is a pleasure to have the chance to address the House today. I welcome the opportunity to debate these regulations, which are the final planned set related to the implementation of the higher education elements of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. To implement the research elements of the Act, there will be further regulations related to the closure of the research councils and the establishment of UKRI—United Kingdom Research and Innovation.

As I mentioned during last week's debate in Committee on the Higher Education (Monetary Penalties and Refusal to Renew an Access and Participation Plan) (England) Regulations 2019, we have made great progress since the Higher Education and Research Act, otherwise known as HERA, came into law in 2017.

You may recall, Mr Speaker, that HERA abolished the Higher Education Funding Council for England, otherwise known as HEFCE, and the director of fair access to higher education, more commonly known as the Office for Fair Access, or OFFA. A new regulator was created—the Office for Students, or the OfS—to oversee and monitor the activities, including in relation to fair access and participation, of English higher education providers that register with it. The OfS currently regulates registered HE providers under transitional arrangements, and we hope the new regulatory regime will be fully operational from August this year.

In addition to retaining existing HEFCE and OFFA functions for the transitional period, the OfS has gradually begun to exercise its functions under HERA. HERA gave the Office for Students the power to create a new single register of higher education providers. Registration with the OfS is the only route for providers to access student support funding through charging fees for courses that attract student loans. It is now a requirement for an institution to obtain degree-awarding powers or to obtain the right to call themselves a university. Since the formation of the Office for Students on 1 January 2018, it has registered more than 350 higher education providers—352 as of 13 May, to be precise—to exacting standards, including all English universities.

The HERA reforms to the system of regulating higher education were wide ranging, which means that a number of changes to the statute book are needed to reflect the reforms introduced and ensure the smooth running of existing legislation.

That brings us to why we are here today. The main purpose of the regulations before the House is to make consequential amendments to existing legislation—a standard procedure after any primary legislation has passed.

The majority of those amendments replace references to now defunct bodies or repealed legislation. They also reflect the diversification of HE providers and the wide range of providers that are registered with and regulated by the OfS. Further, they reflect the movement to a

[Chris Skidmore]

formal regulatory system based on registration. Some of the cross-references in other enactments relate to the quasi-regulation of higher education institutions by HEFCE, and others to receipt of or eligibility for funding. The amendments reflect that nuance to preserve the original intention of such provisions.

The OfS assumed responsibility for determining applications for university title on 1 April this year. Before that date, applications were determined by the Privy Council. Transitional regulations were made to allow applications made before 31 March to be dealt with under the old system. Further provision is made in the regulations in relation to university title, to ensure that the consequential amendments they contain do not disturb applications already in process under the old regime.

The regulations also enable registered HE providers that are charities to become exempt from registration with, and direct regulation by, the Charity Commission. If a provider chooses to take advantage of that opportunity, the OfS will act as principal regulator for the provider, enabling it to avoid duplicative regulatory returns to both the Charity Commission and the OfS. HEFCE was formerly principal regulator for HEIs that it funded. A registered charity that does not wish to become exempt will not become exempt against its will; a provider must take action to obtain the exemption. This amendment is intended to create greater flexibility and choice for charitable bodies that are registered HE providers.

I am pleased to say that the regulations make the regulators code applicable to all the OfS's regulatory functions, under section 24 of the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Act 2006, fulfilling a commitment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) in 2017 during the passage of HERA. I know that he and the House will be pleased to see the progress made in that regard.

I thank my trusted ministerial colleagues for the assistance and collaboration of their Departments in establishing the consequential amendments required. In short, the regulations create the opportunity for more charitable bodies to become exempt from direct regulation by the Charity Commission; ensure that key enactments continue to work in the real world, minimising the risk of disruption and chaos; and put OfS compliance with the regulators code on a statutory footing.

I have highlighted the wide-ranging nature of the legislation affected by these amendments. If the amendments are not approved, it could have serious negative consequences for the HE sector. Among other things, it could result in: confusion around whether certain providers have to charge VAT on student fees; the Office for Students not being subject to the public sector equality duty; certain charities being unexpectedly faced with a change to their accounting rules, resulting in confusion and more paperwork and potentially affecting students and their overall experience; and students being denied their full entitlement to state benefits because of outdated references to defunct legislation.

This Government firmly believe that the higher education regulatory system must effectively protect the interests of students in the short, medium and long term. I hope Members will agree that the regulations are of the utmost importance to students and the sector alike and will approve them.

2.14 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his detailed explanation of this statutory instrument. He has stated—we do not intend radically to dispute the point—that the regulations largely make consequential amendments to existing primary legislation, to make it consistent with the objectives and content of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, in addition to the points he made about the Charities Act 2011. However, I am informed that the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee in the other place decided yesterday to defer consideration of the regulations for one week. Can the Minister shed some light on why his colleagues in the other place have decided to do so? It is rather puzzling.

The Higher Education and Research Act created a new regulatory framework for higher education in England, including a new regulator—the Office for Students—and a new register of higher education institutions, essentially creating a new legal category of “registered higher education provider”. That will now include institutions in the further education sector, and my own college, Blackpool and The Fylde College, will be one of the institutions to benefit from that.

The regulations amend existing primary legislation so that, where appropriate, it refers to registered higher education providers. That is not a contentious decision; it is a legal tidying-up exercise, following the creation of a new regulatory framework. However, as the Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), pointed out on the Floor of the House and several times in Committee, the OfS, to which many of the powers are being transferred from HEFCE, is a very different bird, with a different remit and different powers. It is therefore reasonable that we look carefully at how these changes might have an impact on HE providers.

The regulations ensure that all registered higher education providers can use an existing legal opt-out of certain laws governing charities, so that they will instead be governed by the OfS. We remain concerned about the Government's continued marketised view of the OfS. We continue to be critical of the wider regulatory regime underpinning the 2017 Act and the way in which it is being applied, in particular the extent to which the Government are forcing the operations of free markets into the higher education system, without any sense of the consequences, in a Bill that was put together before Brexit and takes no account of its consequences. Can the Minister confirm that the OfS will be the sole arbiter in those cases, rather than the Charity Commission?

The explanatory note to the regulations says:

“Part 4 (regulation 43) makes amendments to Schedule 3 to the Charities Act 2011 in relation to exempt charities that are regulated by the OfS as their Principal Regulator. The amendments enable any registered higher education provider that is a charity to become exempt by an Order in Council, and remove exempt charity status from a provider that ceases to be registered with the OfS.”

These are important and powerful instruments. On the final point, about removing exempt charity status from a provider that ceases to be registered with the OfS, how will that be actioned and followed up, and what mechanisms will be in place? How will those decisions thereafter be scrutinised?

Two years on from the Bill receiving Royal Assent, we are still tidying up the legislation that has come from it. The Minister said, no doubt with a sigh of relief, that

we are reaching the final set of regulations directly relating to the 2017 Act. However, as the former universities Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington—my opposite number during the Bill's passage through the House—said in a Delegated Legislation Committee last week:

“It has been almost four years now that we have been at it.”—[*Official Report, Fourth Delegated Legislation Committee*, 8 May 2019; c.11.]

I have to confess that I have been at it on this legislation throughout that time, and the Minister may begin to feel that he too is becoming accustomed to being at it, because this is the third week in a row that he and I have debated regulations relating to the Act.

The Minister and I had a lively discussion last week on the Higher Education (Monetary Penalties and Refusal to Renew an Access and Participation Plan) (England) Regulations 2019. It might not sound like the most fruitful possibility for a lively discussion, but we managed it. That gave Members on the Statutory Instrument Committee, including Government Members such as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the hon. Member for Orpington, the ability to raise important questions about access and participation, adult and part-time learning, the status of the Office for Students and, importantly, the current progress of the Augar review, on which we are still waiting for an update from the Government. The Minister is very welcome to update the House today if he chooses to do so.

The week prior to that, we challenged the Government over a number of unanswered questions relating to the Higher Education (Registration Fees) (England) Regulations 2019, about which we and the universities sector have had a number of concerns, including the special arrangements for micro and new providers, the formula used to determine the cost of registration for providers and the alarming nature of how quickly the Government's proposed contribution to this exercise has fallen. In particular, we were concerned that the Government were making new and extraordinarily bureaucratic and expensive demands on universities at a time when their future is uncertain, and that is why we voted against the regulations.

These naturally reflect on the motion that the Government have chosen to bring forward on the Floor of the House today. It is our belief that, in principle, this statutory instrument is not unduly contentious, and I am led to believe that that opinion is shared by the Government. Why, therefore, do they need to use the time of the full House, rather than a Delegated Legislation Committee, to attempt to rubber-stamp a series of consequential amendments and the other issues pertaining to the Charities Act? The reason really is that the Government are bringing business to the House when they have very little else to debate. It is in sharp contrast to the way in which the Government dealt with the previous two SIs, to which I have referred, both of which were far more contentious and both of which touched on continued concerns about the operation of this Act. In my submission, those would have been far more suitable for debate in this Chamber.

It is a stark reminder that the Government have no domestic agenda to bring to this place at the moment, and that the Prime Minister lacks the power and majority needed to advance those few policies her Government do have. I suggest that the Government should be using

this time to bring forward new policies and actual legislation, or matters that, from previous legislation such as HERA, are contentious and continue to give concerns as they are taken forward in detail and that should be debated by the whole House. As these regulations appear to contain no substantive matters of new policy at all, will the Minister tell me why it was felt that they should be debated on the Floor of the House today?

The explanatory note on the regulations also says:

“A full impact assessment has not been produced for this instrument as no, or no significant, impact on the private, voluntary or public sectors is foreseen.”

So what implications do these changes have? We have of course been critical of the wider regulatory regime underpinning the 2017 Act, particularly, as I have said already, the extent to which the Government are forcing the operation of free markets on to the higher education system. As the regulator, the OfS is legally required to promote competition between HE providers, encouraging them to operate as if they are part of a competitive market, rather than a co-operative education system. We have previously committed to removing this duty on the regulator.

We have also expressed our concern about some of the powers designated to the Office for Students on data sharing. In July 2018, the Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), and I debated the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Cooperation and Information Sharing) Regulations 2018 in another Delegated Legislation Committee relating to this Act. As part of that debate, I referenced the fact that section 63 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, to which the regulations refer, does not place a limitation on the type of information that may be provided, and therefore that it could include personal data. You and I, Mr Speaker, were in this Chamber to hear the urgent question earlier on the issues of WhatsApp and the use of data, so I think it is entirely appropriate that we raise this issue again today.

With these regulations, we are exhibiting potential issues with data sharing, as is attested by a briefing I received in advance of this debate from defenddigitalme. For the assistance of the House, defenddigitalme advocates for children's privacy in data and digital rights, and in response to concerns from teachers, parents and campaigners about the invasive uses of children's personal information collected in the course of their education in England. That is one of the issues that I now want to raise further with the Minister. On the effects of the new regulations, it has said to us:

“Over 25 million students, children, and staff across England's Education sector will be denied control over their digital footprint, in perpetuity. Data will be copied to an indefinite number of data recipients, without clear safeguards for scope creep, of new or onward uses, or users...”

There is no meaningful limitation in its existing powers for what purposes OfS may pass on personal data to third parties; nor for which purposes those third-parties in turn may use the data on the face of the Act...or in the 2018 Regulation no 607...

By giving the OfS—and potentially its own prescribed persons (third parties), access to the entire education dataset of the population, past and present, since 2002:

There is no oversight”—

as far as we can see—

“of its data handling or accountability for processing...”

[Gordon Marsden]

There is no published plan to inform each...adult of the change of data controller or new processing purposes by any new body...

There is no route for redress if data are wrongly processed or mistakes made...

There is no route for redress if data are wrongly processed...in any processing of anyone's records for the purposes of fraud."

These are important issues. They may be quite technical issues, but they are important issues that bear upon the statutory instrument we are being asked to pass today, and they are issues that we took up during the Committee stage of the Bill.

The regulations bring both the OfS and UKRI on to the list of organisations in schedule 8 to the Digital Economy Act 2017, but there have been widespread concerns about data sharing between higher education providers and private companies. Is the Minister able to tell us today in what circumstances data will be shared and when students will know this has happened? As a point of process regarding part 2, regulation 14, on new powers under the Digital Economy Act 2017, can the Minister confirm whether the regulations have been prepared in line with parts 5.1 and 5.2 of the Cabinet Office debt and fraud information sharing review board code of practice, which was passed by this House in November? There does not appear to have been any publication or preparation of data protection impact assessments in relation to the documents accompanying this SI. Applications to amend the schedule should be made through the secretariat, but as we are told that the Cabinet Office committee does not publish any minutes it is unknown whether this happened. Will the Minister tell us why—in respect of the regulations before us today, which the Minister has signed off—his colleagues in the Cabinet Office do not publish minutes in this way?

Is it the intention of the new regulations that through the new data powers they give OfS to receive data in regulations 28 and 32 they can also enable the distribution by OfS of population-wide personal data? I repeat: that includes the personal, confidential data of every pupil from state education since 1996, past, present and future and in perpetuity—over 25 million people, and growing every year—distribution to its own third-party prescribed persons, including potentially Pearson Education Ltd, among other commercial parties, for such wide-ranging company purposes, through the powers of last year's regulations, which set out who the OfS could give data to, and for purposes defined only by that company's memorandum and articles of association, most of which were not even mentioned in the explanatory notes that accompanied that negative statutory instrument?

I would argue that if the Department wishes us to be entirely happy with this SI today, the necessary and proportionate purposes should be made explicit and set on the face of the Act, or corrected in each set of regulations. These are matters on which it would be helpful for the Minister to respond briefly now, or at least for him to put a response in writing for Members of the House, given that they have been raised on the Floor of the House today. We do not, though, propose to divide the House on this statutory instrument today.

2.31 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I am a trifle confused. The territorial extent of the regulations is described as across the UK, but in fact they contain not a lot, if anything, that affects Scotland. They do refer to UKRI, which is the amalgamation into one body of all the research funding councils across the UK, no work on which has actually been done by this Government since the amalgamation was announced in the 2017 Act. This will have a great and deleterious effect on Scotland and on Scottish universities. There is a worrying spectre facing the Scottish universities in regard to research funding, which will no longer come from Europe. Scotland has had more, some would say, than its fair share in population terms, but certainly not more than its fair share in excellence terms because of the research done in Scottish universities, quite often by EU nationals who have given a great boost to the Scottish university sector and who are welcome, and still welcome, in Scotland.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): That will affect not only Scottish universities but English universities, certainly in the midlands and in the Coventry area, where there are two universities. Those universities in Coventry and the midlands do a lot of research and development for Europe, and they sometimes rely on the expertise of employees coming from Europe. We cannot get a guarantee out of the Government that that expenditure will continue at present levels or increase beyond 2020. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is cause for concern for all universities in Scotland and in England?

Marion Fellows: I certainly do, but as the hon. Gentleman is aware, I have a particular interest in Scottish universities.

I thank the Minister—it was a bit bad of me not to thank him immediately—for his detailed explanation of the regulations and for the promise that more regulations will be brought forward on research. I gave him—I am sure he remembers it well—a 101 on Scottish universities education when he came to the Education Committee this morning. It was a pleasure to meet him and to listen to what he had to say, and I believe he has the interests of universities at large at heart. I hope he will take up my offer for him to look closely at what is being done in Scotland about funding and widening access, which we discussed this morning. However, I am going off the point and I do not wish to speak for long.

I share the puzzlement of the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden). No one is against these regulations; they are technical and they will help to ensure that the 2017 Act makes sense after we leave—if we do—the European Union. My preferred option is to stay, of course. The regulations are really just technical, and I am baffled about why they have been brought to the Floor of the House but the Minister has not published the information on research funding that universities need now; that is almost teasing the whole university sector. Universities UK was very pleased because a successor to Horizon 2020 is moving forward, and we may, as a United Kingdom, be a third party and involved with that. Some of the best research done across the UK and across Europe has been the best precisely because it has been pan-European, not confined to the UK.

As has been mentioned in this place before, the Government's proposals for tier 4 visas for students after three years in the UK will have a much greater impact in Scotland, where a standard degree is generally a four-year degree. That must be dealt with. It also affects those students who carry on, who want to do real and lasting research and want to stay in Scotland. The whole premise of tier 4 visas is to put off—it has already put off—researchers coming to the UK, to Scotland as well, and to make it much more difficult for universities to attract the right kind of research that they can build on and keep the UK in the forefront of research worldwide.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I strongly agree with the hon. Lady. Does she agree that the policy affects not only Scotland, where four-year courses are a norm, but courses such as engineering throughout the UK, where four-year courses are standard, and other courses where the master's degree is required as the first degree that people get, because it is a four-year course, and because of the level of learning that is needed to reach that standard?

Marion Fellows: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have been a bit remiss. Medicine is affected as well; many degrees in England, as well as in Scotland, last longer than four years. The Government must take that issue seriously.

Can the Minister say when he will introduce further regulations under the 2017 Act? That is crucial to universities the length and breadth of the UK.

2.38 pm

Chris Skidmore: I thank hon. Members for participating in this debate. I shall try to respond briefly to the points that have been raised.

I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for her remarks on the Scottish system. I will be heading to Scotland in early June and will endeavour to focus also on some of the issues of widening participation. I have regular meetings with the Scottish Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science, Richard Lochhead. On the points that the hon. Lady raised about research, I know that we are going a bit off piste in relation to the statutory instrument before us, but I reiterate my commitment to ensuring that we maintain our common research links with our European partners. When I was in Berlin, speaking at the "Going Global" conference hosted by the British Council, I met Minister Karliczek, Federal Minister of Educational Research, and had meetings with the Fraunhofer and Max Planck research organisations to make that commitment.

Regarding our association with such future programmes as Horizon Europe, yesterday the Government published our international research and innovation strategy, making clear our commitment to being outward-facing and ensuring that we continue to endeavour to have strong global research links.

On tier 4 visas—the hon. Lady will be aware that the Home Secretary is sitting beside me—we must remember that researchers from international countries are still able to come to the United Kingdom. We recently launched the first Future Leaders Fellowships programme, £900 million of investment in 550 international fellowships, which has seen people from Japan to Canada coming to

the UK. We recognise there are issues relating to visas that need to be looked at as part of the consultation for the immigration White Paper, but issues around tier 4 visas have not prevented existing international researchers from being able to participate in UK research life.

Turning to the points made by the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), on the amendment to schedule 3 of the Charities Act 2011, which sets out that charities are exempt from registration with and direct regulation by the Charity Commission for England and Wales, HEFCE was the principal regulator for HE providers that were exempt charities under the existing schedule 3 of the 2011 Act, and the OfS was made principal regulator for higher education under the earlier consequential and transitional regulation which came into force on 1 April 2018. The amendments to schedule 3 require that currently exempt HE charities remain registered with the OfS to continue to hold exempt status and provide the opportunity for any provider registered with the OfS to be exempt by applying to the Privy Council. That will mean that exempt charities registered with HE providers will not have to register with or make returns with the Charity Commission, but will instead report to the OfS as principal regulator.

The amendments have been made with the intention to reduce the administrative and regulatory burden on charities and ensure that the OfS has a sufficient regulatory relationship with the relevant exempt charities to be an effective principal regulator. The amendment to the Charities Act made the removal of exempt status automatic upon deregistration, so no action is actually required by the OfS. The OfS can deregister a provider only if certain conditions are met. That covers both conditions on registration, and consideration of the denial of an access and participation plan.¹

On the impact assessment, the regulations contain two sets of saving provisions. The first deal with the applications made for university title that were made before 1 April 2019. The second type of saving provisions relate to the repeal of a particular statutory provision under which so-called designation orders were made. Those orders designated certain providers as higher education institutions. There are a number of references and regulations governing teachers' pension schemes and local government schemes to designated institutions. If we do not preserve the orders for those very narrow purposes, future staff's eligibility for the schemes will be lost, so there are benefits in ensuring that staff have access to those pension schemes.

The entire purpose of the consequential saving provisions is to preserve the intention and scope of the underlying legislation in the context of the changes brought about by HERA. We therefore do not anticipate any additional regulatory burden as a result of the regulations. As I said in my opening speech, the main purpose of the consequential amendments is to minimise the risk of chaos and disruption to students, staff and providers. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the SLSC asking for clarity on a few of the provisions in the regulations. I understand that it often does so as part of the scrutiny process and we will respond in due course.

The hon. Gentleman focused on the risks around data sharing in relation to regulation 14 and schedule 8 to the Digital Economy Act 2017. Schedule 8 allows bodies named in it to disclose information to each other for the purposes of taking action in connection with

1. [Official Report, 4 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 1MC.]

[Chris Skidmore]

fraud perpetrated against a public authority. The amendments replace Innovate UK and existing research councils with references to UKRI, HEFCE and the OfS, because HEFCE has been abolished, and Innovate UK and the research councils have been incorporated into UKRI. If we do not make the amendment, the OfS will not be able to make or receive fraud-related disclosures envisaged under the Act. There would also be ambiguity as to whether disclosures could be made or received by relevant constituent parts of UKRI.

Separately, regulations 28 and 32 amend the Education (Information About Children in Alternative Provision) (England) Regulations 2007 and the Education (Individual Pupil Information) (Prescribed Persons) (England) Regulations 2009. The provision requires institutions that are not schools in receipt of funding from the Department for Education to provide certain pupil information to the Secretary of State and other bodies, including HEFCE. The amendment will substitute OfS for HEFCE, as HEFCE no longer exists. That is the same for regulation 32.¹

It is important to state on record that we need data sharing to track pupils to ensure, when it comes to improving the position of disadvantaged students and students in widening participation categories, the data is available.

Gordon Marsden: I appreciate the detailed explanation of the technical reasons for the changes and I have no wish to prolong the debate unduly, but the thrust of my remarks was to express our continued concerns about the inadequacy of the protections in this area. Will the Minister give the House an assurance today that he is confident the status quo in terms of the safeguards will in fact do the business, given that we and other bodies have raised substantial concerns about the current procedures?

Chris Skidmore: The section 3 regulations the hon. Gentleman mentioned in his earlier contribution were debated at the time of the regulations. The consequential provisions substitute the OfS for HEFCE. I will put on record that the Department takes its obligations under data protection laws very seriously. There is a panel that assesses each sharing request for public benefit, proportionality, the legal underpinning, and strict information security standards. I reiterate that no data sharing will take place without the Department ensuring that those measures are taken into account.

That takes us to the wider issue of the OfS being part of the regulators code and the application of that code meeting the commitment the Government made during

the passage of the Act. In addition to the matters the OfS must have to regard to under HERA are the five principles of good regulation under the regulators code. It is worth putting them on record: the regulator should carry out activities in a way that supports those it regulates to comply and grow; regulators should provide simple and straightforward ways to engage with those they regulate and hear their views; regulators should base their regulatory activities on risk; regulators should share information about compliance and risk; and regulators should ensure clear information, guidance and advice is available to help those they regulate to meet their responsibilities to comply. The opportunity for the OfS to be a part of the regulators code is an additional indication of the responsibilities that the OfS takes its new role very seriously.

If I had longer I would go through the importance of why we are debating the regulations. As Universities Minister, I am delighted they have reached the Floor of the House rather than Committee Corridor. I believe this marks a significant moment in the reforms that began way back with the first Green Paper in 2015, all the way through to the final provisions of the Act being put in place. We have seen a shift from a provider-focused system to a student-focused system. We have seen a system that will now move to focusing on how we can best ensure we have value for money for students and deliver the best student experience. We can ensure that new providers, including FE providers, are able to enter the market.

When addressing the Education Committee this morning, we spoke at length about how we can ensure that FE and HE providers have greater opportunities to work together. One important part of the regulations is ensuring that FE providers will be able to have degree-awarding powers and apply to a much more streamlined system through the OfS. My ambition and long-term hope is that it will allow FE providers to have degree-awarding powers, rather than going through the rather complex and nuanced current franchising route. That will ensure we create a single system for a post-18 education world that benefits students, so they understand their role in the education system.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Further Implementation etc.) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 29 April, be approved.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Resolved,

That Pete Wishart be appointed to the House of Commons Commission in place of Stewart Hosie in pursuance of the House of Commons Administration Act 1978, as amended.—(Jo Churchill.)

1. [Official Report, 4 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 2MC.]

Serious Violence

2.49 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of serious violence.

Serious violence is a national emergency that we are tackling head on. It is all too common to wake up to the heartbreaking story of slaughter on our streets. Like many parents, I fear for my children. I lie awake worrying when they go out, waiting to hear the key turn in the door, desperate to know that they are safe and back home. Tragically, for some, that moment of relief never comes. They never hear that welcome jangling of keys. Their children never come home. Many are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. We are seeing an epidemic of senseless violence to which anyone can fall victim.

Since becoming Home Secretary, I have done everything in my power to help end the bloodshed. It has been my top priority, and we have responded to the crisis with urgent investment and additional powers, but, while lives are still being lost, it is clear that more must be done.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend watched any of Channel 5's "Police Code Zero"? If he were to do so, he would share the frustration of so many of our constituents who write to us complaining about the leniency of sentences even for violent attacks on the police, notwithstanding the powers we have given to the courts to deal with that. Why will they not use them?

Sajid Javid: I have not yet had the opportunity to watch the programme to which my right hon. Friend referred, but I absolutely understand the issue he raised. It is important that we do everything we can to support our brave police officers. I and the Policing Minister have made a number of announcements in the past 12 months to do just that. We continue to work with police officers and their leaders across the country, including talking to frontline officers about what more we can do.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Serious violence is often—not always—caused by organised criminal groups. Does the Home Secretary share the head of the National Crime Agency's assessment that, without more resources, we are in danger of losing the fight against organised crime?

Sajid Javid: I share the concerns around serious organised crime. I welcome the National Crime Agency's national strategic assessment, which says that the cost of such crime to society is at least £37 billion a year. Clearly the work the NCA is doing with police forces around the country is vital. It is important that we continue to work together with the NCA and the police. It was welcome that this year we increased resources to the NCA to fight serious organised crime. We will certainly look at longer term resource need in the spending review.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have discussed this with the Policing Minister before: despite the increase in funds to recruit more policemen, funding

is not sufficient. That is the message my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) referred to just a moment ago. Violent crime is increasing, particularly in places such as Coventry and other parts of the west midlands. The police have been reduced to firefighting in an area for two or three months, before the resource goes to another area. The vacuum is then filled by more crime. Can the Home Secretary not do a bit more about that?

Sajid Javid: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will come to resourcing: both general police resourcing for all activities and resourcing dedicated to serious violence. He will also welcome that it is not just about resourcing; it is also about powers. I will talk about that in a moment, too.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Home Secretary will realise that, in the £2.1 billion ask, Lynne Owens also raised the role of the Border Force. As the Home Secretary and I have discussed, of the young offenders I have met who have been involved in a gang or who have used or carried a knife, many have no idea where Colombia is or about the trafficking of cocaine and where it comes from. It comes because there are adult gangsters organising that traffic through Amsterdam and Spain. Will he say a little more about the role of the Border Force, which he knows has also been subject to cuts during the austerity period?

Sajid Javid: Let me first take this opportunity to thank the right hon. Gentleman for the work he has done and continues to do to help fight serious violence, particularly that done on the Serious Violence Taskforce. From that, he will know that a number of issues have been and continue to be looked at. He is right to raise the issue about Border Force and drugs coming into the country. I understand that last year Border Force had a record haul of class A drugs. There is still more to do, but it is good to see that it is stopping more and more drugs reaching our shores.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The Home Secretary is being generous with his time. This week at Killingholme docks a truck with £3 million-worth of cocaine hidden in it was stopped and prevented from coming into the local area. I wonder how many trucks with that amount of drugs get through. He will be well aware that Grimsby suffers from a significant county lines issue. This week, a man was stabbed after drawing out money in the evening, presumably by people wanting drug money. So much in this area is scaring people in smaller towns such as Grimsby; it is not just in the big cities. Is he giving all the attention he could to areas such as Grimsby?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of county lines, which I will talk a bit more about in a moment. In the last few years, many towns like Grimsby across the UK have been seriously impacted by the growing county lines problem. The NCA has published more information on it. We estimate that there are probably at least 2,000 county lines. She is right to mention the problems that that is causing Grimsby and elsewhere. When I talk about these issues later, I hope she will see some of the action we are taking and the results coming about because of that.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for giving way yet again; he is being most generous in giving way to both sides of the House. Does he agree that we also need to look at the oversight of police and crime commissioners and how they are spending and managing their money? For instance, in the west midlands the PCC has managed to accumulate £106 million in reserves, and there has been a record rise in the precept, yet he is closing and flogging off Solihull police station. Now we have real uncertainty about whether 160,000 people will have a police station that they can call local.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Whatever resources are available to police, the public expect them to be spent efficiently and used in a way that will ultimately help. He talks about the west midlands, which has one of the forces that is most affected by serious violence. I have met the force's leaders a number of times. He is right to question whether funding is being spent properly and appropriately.

My eyes are open to the scale of the challenge. Last year, we saw the highest number of knife murders since records began. Already this year we have seen 30 fatal stabbings on the streets of London alone. These are stark figures, yes, of course, but to truly understand what they mean we must look beyond the statistics to the lives they represent. Over the last year I have made it my mission to understand the real impact of the rise in serious violence. I have met the families of victims and heard their harrowing stories; I have spoken to the doctors and nurses who fight to save lives; I have talked to youth workers, who try to turn people away from violence; and I have consulted our police, who are at the frontline of the battle against knife crime.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Home Secretary mentioned the 30 murders in the capital so far this year. Last autumn, two young men—one a 15-year-old child—lost their lives through stabbings in my constituency. Just a few weeks ago, a 15-year-old was seriously stabbed on their way home from school. He talks about meeting various people to discuss this problem, but the reality on the ground is that locally our youth services have been cut, our school budgets have been cut and our local government budgets have been cut, so the resources going in to tackle this serious violence are being diminished all the time. What does he have to say about that?

Sajid Javid: When I met the hon. Lady, we had the opportunity to discuss these issues, and I hope she will allow me to progress through my remarks and answer precisely that question.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Members of the Youth Parliament representing Central Bedfordshire are campaigning to make young people aware that a person is in much more danger if they carry a knife. It does not protect them. How can the Government help these excellent Members of the Youth Parliament get the message out to other people that they are much less safe if they stupidly carry a knife?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One way the Government are trying to get that message out is through the #knifefree campaign, which I will come to in a moment.

From having all these conversations and meeting people, including the families of victims of knife crime, one message is loud and clear: there is no one single solution to stopping serious violence. To tackle it properly will require action on many fronts and joined-up action across Government. With our serious violence strategy, we are fighting on all fronts with all partners to try to stop this senseless violence. Our united approach is starting to see some progress. National crime statistics for the last year show that the rate of rise in knife crime is starting to slow. The most recent figures from the Metropolitan police show a fall in the number of homicides in the past 12 months, and the number of knife injuries among under-25s fell by 15% in the capital, with over 300 fewer young people being stabbed, but still far too many lives are being lost and I remain resolute in my mission to help end the bloodshed.

Allow me Mr Speaker, to update the House on some of the work that is already under way. First, we are empowering police to respond to serious violence. I have joined anti-knife crime patrols and met senior officers from the worst-affected areas. They are the experts, so I have listened to what they say they need. They told me they needed more resources, so we have increased police funding by almost £1 billion this year, including council tax. As a result, police and crime commissioners are already planning to recruit about 3,500 extra officers and police staff.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Prime Minister told me at Prime Minister's Question Time last week that £1 billion was going back in, after she had cut 21,000 officers. In Ealing, Acton and Chiswick, where the number of aggravated burglaries and muggings has rocketed, how many officers will we have at the end of this year, compared with the number now? If they like, the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister would be welcome to visit; senior officers in Ealing and Acton would be happy to host them. We have lost both our police counters, but we would be happy to sit down and thrash this out. Our door is always open.

Sajid Javid: My understanding is that this year the Met plan to hire at least 300 additional officers. I cannot tell her how many there will be in Ealing, because that will be an operational decision for the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, but that increase can take place because of the rise in funding—the largest cash increase since 2010.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): In my constituency, we are seeing stabbings on a weekly basis. It is difficult to find exact numbers, but both boroughs that I cover—Redbridge and Waltham Forest—have lost about 200 officers each. How will the increase the Home Secretary is talking about plug the gap left by so many officers leaving the service?

Sajid Javid: One thing that will certainly help in our capital is the violent crime taskforce, which is dedicated to fighting violent crime in London, as well as other measures that I will come to in a moment—for example, the resourcing specifically for fighting serious violence, in the Metropolitan region and elsewhere, including new police officers specifically dedicated to that fight.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for what he has just said, but I would like some clarification. He said the increase was the

biggest since 2010. Will he confirm that it is the only increase since 2010 and that the figure has otherwise been cut each year since I was Policing Minister in 2010?

Sajid Javid: It is not the only increase. In the previous year, I think it was around £460 million—something over £400 million, anyway—and this is double what it was the previous year, so I cannot confirm that because it is not correct.

The police also told me they needed more powers, so we are changing the law through the Offensive Weapons Bill, which is expected to gain Royal Assent tomorrow. The Bill will make it harder for young people to buy knives or acid and will introduce the knife crime protection orders that police asked for. They also told me they needed urgent support to deal with the immediate challenge. They asked for £50 million, but I doubled it to £100 million, with two thirds going straight to the police. Last week, I announced that £63.4 million of that had been allocated to the 18 worst-affected forces. It will pay for surge activity and additional patrols. A further £1.6 million will help to improve the quality of data to support planning and operations, with the remaining £35 million being used to support the creation of violence reduction units.

The police also told me they wanted targeted stop-and-search—because it works. The Met Commissioner, Cressida Dick, has linked its increased use in hotspot areas to the fall in youth stabbings. For that reason, I have made it simpler for the police to use these powers by relaxing the rules on section 60 searches in seven of the worst-hit areas. At least 3,000 more officers can now authorise searches in areas where violence is anticipated, which will help to take more weapons off our streets.

Last year alone, police in England and Wales made nearly 8,000 arrests for possession of weapons and firearms following a stop-and-search, so it undoubtedly works, but we will continue to work with the police and communities to ensure its use remains targeted and intelligence-led. Of course, officers should never search people based on their race or ethnicity. This is not about any specific community; it is about protecting those most at risk. A black person is four times more likely to be a victim of homicide than a white person. In London, 53% of knife crime victims are from a black, Asian or minority ethnic background. If the targeted use of stop-and-search can save any one of these victims, it can only be a good thing.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am concerned about the impact on the community of the police's increased ability to use section 60 and how innocent black young boys will be affected. I worry whether young people will feel encouraged to go to the police for protection and support if they feel victimised by them because of a blanket section 60 stop-and-search.

Sajid Javid: I understand why the hon. Lady raises this point, but she might be interested to know that the increase in stop-and-search in London in the last year has resulted in very few complaints, and one reason is the increased use of body-worn cameras. Police forces across the country are telling me that thanks to digital technology and evidence gathering they are seeing very few complaints about stop-and-search, especially compared with the levels of the past. She was right to mention innocent young black men—I think that was the phrase

she used—but the increase is saving their lives. No innocent young person, no matter who they are or what their colour or background, should be faced with serious violence on our streets. Stop-and-search saves lives. That is why it is being used.

Secondly, we are investing in our young people's future. Yes, a tough law enforcement response is essential, but by the time the police are called the damage is often already done. To save more lives, we must stop the violence before it starts by helping young people to avoid a life of crime. Giving teenagers more opportunities can transform their lives. I saw that at first hand last week—just a few days ago—when I visited a new OnSide youth zone in Dagenham. That is why we are investing £220 million in early intervention work, the largest investment of this type that we have ever made. Last month I announced that our £200 million youth endowment fund would be run by a charity called Impetus. The 10-year programme will deliver long-term help to those who are most in need, and young people will soon start to benefit, as the first funding round is expected to be launched shortly. The £22 million early youth intervention fund has already supported 29 projects.

I would like to thank the Victims Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). She is unable to join us at the moment, because she is chairing a roundtable on migrant workers and domestic abuse, but she will be here later.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): An analysis of the Government's funding programmes, produced for the Home Affairs Committee, points out that the programmes for youth investment are spread over 10 years. If the Home Secretary looks at the annual funding and adds together the early intervention fund, the trusted relationships fund, the youth endowment fund and the communities and local government fund, he will see that—according to my calculation—the total is only £35 million a year, and that is set against a £760 million cut in youth services. Can he tell me whether those figures are correct?

Sajid Javid: A number of providers of those programmes with whom we have already worked have said that one thing they value deeply is certainty of funding. If the funding is not confirmed and people have to wait year by year, an endowment fund that provides security for up to 10 years can make a big difference to the delivery of services.

I have talked about intervention programmes in the Home Office, but cross-Government work, about which I shall say more shortly, means that there are a number of programmes that aim for similar outcomes resulting from early intervention and efforts to prevent young people from turning to a life of crime in the first place. For example, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has a troubled families programme, and has focused on knife-related crime. Work has also been done by, for instance, the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice.

Yvette Cooper: I appreciate what the Home Secretary has said about certainty. However, I included many of those other cross-Government programmes in my calculation, and I came up with the figure of £35 million a year—and that is only 5% of the scale of the cuts in

[Yvette Cooper]

youth services. Can the Home Secretary tell me how many young people will be reached by the programmes that he has announced, and how many placements have been lost as a result of the cuts in the youth service? Knowing those basic facts about how many young people we are reaching and how many we are not reaching is crucial to our ability to assess whether his strategy will work.

Sajid Javid: What I am talking about specifically is targeted youth intervention to stop young people turning to crime, in this instance serious violence. The right hon. Lady was, I think, referring to youth services more broadly, perhaps those provided by local councils, which are more universal in nature. My focus is much more targeted. As I said a moment ago, I went to see the OnSide youth zone project in Dagenham, which is supported by the local authority and others. That is a much more universal project. I welcome that kind of work as well, but I am not sure that we are comparing like with like when we talk about universal versus targeted services.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): If we do not engage with young people in the first place, how can we target them? I have seen the amazing work that youth services do in my constituency. I have particular praise for Llanrumney Phoenix boxing club and Tiger Bay boxing club, which are doing brilliant work with youth services and partners across the piece. They are also working with South Wales police, helping hundreds of young people in my constituency.

However, the facts are exactly as they were presented by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). Between 2012 and 2016, 600 youth centres have been closed, 139,000 places have been lost, and £760 million has been cut from youth service budgets. Half the youth service in London has been lost under the Home Secretary's governance. How on earth will the little pot of money that he has announced offset that huge cut, and that huge lack of engagement with young people?

Sajid Javid: I do not think that this is a small pot of funding. I have referred to the £200 million that is targeted at early intervention, and I think that will make a difference. For example, I am supporting Redthread, whose work in trauma units in hospitals will be extended to London, Birmingham and other places.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): We have lost 3,600 youth workers, along with the places mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). We have also lost nearly 7,000 of the community support officers who play such an important role in preventing crime. Is the Home Secretary aware that the National Citizen Service, a flagship Government-funded programme initiated by the former Prime Minister, sucks up most of the youth service budget? I am not denigrating its work—it does good work—but some of its spending is deeply concerning, such as the £10 million spent on a rebranding exercise, which could have been spent on tackling youth crime.

Sajid Javid: The National Citizen Service does some very important work. We should recognise the way in which it helps young people by giving them activities, bringing them together and, potentially, turning them away from what could be a difficult life involving crime. As I said earlier, the early intervention youth fund is already supporting 29 projects across England and Wales, and it is estimated that by the end of March 2020 it will have helped at least 60,000 children and young people. I think that demonstrates its reach.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I appreciate the efforts the Home Secretary is making in describing the wonderful work that a very few limited projects are doing, but I would suggest that they benefit—and I am sure that they do benefit—a relatively small number of young people.

When I was lead member for children and youth services in Hounslow about 12 years ago, I was told by young people, including so-called vulnerable young people, that they appreciated the good, specialist work that youth workers and others were doing with them, but they did not want to go into a facility with other young people and be labelled vulnerable. They wanted to participate in a universal youth facility, to be seen as part of the crowd, and perhaps to do some specific work, as and when, with those specialist workers. Effectively, the only youth work that is currently being done is for those so-called vulnerable young people. They feel labelled and separated from others, because the universal provision has all but disappeared in most of our local authorities.

Sajid Javid: I am afraid it is simply not the case that the only funding that is being provided is for—to use the hon. Lady's words—vulnerable young people. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) mentioned the National Citizen Service. That is open to everyone. A moment ago, I referred to the onside youth zones, including the £5 million youth centre that has just opened in Dagenham and is supported partly by taxpayers' money. It too is open to everyone, and I suggest that the hon. Lady go and take a look. I think that she will see all types of young people there.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): OnSide is setting up 100 youth zones. They are not youth centres, because they are trying to do something different, and to be a bit more welcoming to younger people rather than using the traditional and somewhat tired format. It is interesting to note that where those zones have been opened, youth-related crime has fallen by 50%. Does that not also demonstrate that there is a role for those who look at things differently?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to make that point. The first OnSide youth zone was in Bolton. He is right about the fall in crime and the positive impact that that has had on the community. The new youth zone I mentioned in Dagenham is just opening, but I was incredibly impressed by what I saw last week, because it is open to all young people from the age of 11 to 18, and because it can make a difference with the hours that it is open and the facilities that are there. Again, it is a universal youth service available to everyone, with all sorts of activities, so I agree with his comments.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I have come slightly late to the debate. I opened several OnSide youth centres, but I also think it is a shame that we have lost some good youth facilities. The trouble was that the youth service was too much of a nine-to-five service for the convenience of people who worked in it, rather than of the kids whom we desperately needed to engage. OnSide makes a difference because it is a partnership between local authority youth services, children's charities and business, and because it provides a variety of services at a variety of times to a large variety of children. It is a great model and we need more such models.

Sajid Javid: Let me take the opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for his work as a children's Minister. He speaks with experience. He is absolutely right to talk about the model that OnSide represents. It is a vital partnership between local authorities, and therefore taxpayers, and people in the local community, including local businesses and local benefactors. In many cases, they have come from that community and have a stake in it, so they want improvements to be made. It is exactly the kind of model that has a strong future.

Ruth Cadbury: I appreciate the effectiveness of the work of universal youth services, such as OnSide, but unfortunately they are few and far between. OnSide presented its proposal for Hammersmith, and I asked whether my constituents would be able to attend. It said, "Ah, no—it'll only be for young people who live in Hammersmith." Surely the Home Secretary is saying that we need something of the scale of OnSide in every community so that every young person can go to one nearby. Is that not about reinserting the funding for universal youth provision in every community, which has been cut by such devastating amounts, as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee said?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Lady that I want more of those types of youth facilities in more communities. The action we are taking by working with our partners will certainly allow that to happen.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Home Secretary give way one more time?

Sajid Javid: I must make some progress.

We also continue to refresh our national media campaign, which I referred to earlier. The #knifefree campaign warns young people about the dangers of carrying a knife.

I want to highlight a third action, which is the multi-agency public health approach, and how it can help to tackle violent crime. It involves all parts of the public sector working together to stop serious violence. To make that happen, we are consulting on a new legal duty to ensure that every agency plays its part. Our teachers, nurses and social workers already work tirelessly to protect our children. It is not about asking them to do any more, because they already do so much; it is about giving them the support and the confidence they need to report their concerns, safe in the knowledge that everyone will close ranks to protect that child. It is also about ensuring that all agencies share information to ensure that no one slips through the cracks. To support the multi-agency approach, we are investing £35 million in new violence reduction units to bring local partners

together in hotspots. Work is under way to finalise those plans; I hope to provide an update on the proposals in the coming weeks.

Finally, we are investigating the root causes of violence so we can tackle the problem at source. We know that social media plays a part, with gangs trading weapons and taunting each other online. Our new "Online Harms White Paper" sets out our expectations for internet companies to do more. Later this month, the Met will launch a new social media hub to enhance our response.

The changing drugs market and the growth of county lines gangs is another key factor. The National Crime Agency estimates that there are about 2,000 active county lines fuelling serious violence. Last September, we set up the national county lines co-ordination centre. It is already showing results, with more than 1,100 people arrested and more than 1,300 people safeguarded following national intensification weeks.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary agree that one way to gain intelligence and to detect county lines, gangs or vulnerable people and children is to have school police officers? Why, therefore, do only half the secondary schools in my constituency have a school police officer? They are not regarded as the priority, because the Met cannot recruit enough officers for the numbers leaving or the numbers it is being reduced by.

Sajid Javid: As I mentioned earlier, the number of officers in the Met and in most other forces is increasing; it is not being reduced. How those officers are deployed is clearly an operational decision. It is for the police to decide how best to use those officers. While I absolutely see the benefit of school police officers, it is right that that decision is not made by Ministers or by Parliament, but is based on the operational needs in the area. I hope that the hon. Lady welcomes the increase in police officer numbers, including in the Metropolitan area.

To understand the issue of drugs further, I have appointed Dame Carol Black to conduct an independent review of drugs misuse. She will examine what the market looks like, the harms it causes and what more we might do to combat drugs.

Mr Lammy: Will the Home Secretary clarify whether in the terms of reference for Dame Carol Black he has specifically ruled out decriminalisation or legalisation from the scope of the review?

Sajid Javid: Yes, it has been ruled out.

The Home Office is looking at how data can help us understand some of the pathways into crime. We will develop proposals for a new crime prevention data lab to bring together information and enhance our ability to make more targeted interventions.

The Government are all too aware of the devastating impact—

Yvette Cooper: Will the Home Secretary give way on the data point?

Sajid Javid: I will.

Yvette Cooper: I may have missed it, but I do not think I have heard the Home Secretary refer to the public health approach. Will he confirm whether that is still the approach of the Home Office, because it is welcome? The definition of a public health approach

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states that it should be focused on a “defined population”. He will be aware that when the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), was before the Select Committee she was not able to tell us what the Home Office’s assessment was of the number of young people at risk of being drawn into crime. Does he now have that assessment, and can he tell us how many people live in the high-risk areas—the hotspots—he has identified?

Sajid Javid: I can absolutely give the right hon. Lady a sense of that. I did mention the public health approach, but I am happy to confirm again that the Government are absolutely going ahead with it. The consultation is going on at the moment, and I hope that when the proposals come to the Floor of the House they will get cross-party support.

The right hon. Lady asked how many people might be at risk. Our serious violence strategy has already set out the risk and protective factors that can increase the likelihood of a young person becoming a victim or perpetrator of serious violence.

There is a range of numbers, depending on where someone comes from and what risk factors we are looking at. For example, the Children’s Commissioner estimates that 27,000 children are at risk of gang involvement, and 7,720 pupils were permanently excluded from school in 2016-17. It is estimated that almost 500,000 children live in low-income households.

It is important not to oversimplify this when we look at the risk group. Evidence suggests that those with multiple risk factors are most at risk. Equally, young people with certain risk factors never commit or become a victim of any crime at all. This is a complex area, and the right hon. Lady is right to ask about it. I would be happy to write to her with a bit more information, but I hope that what I have shared with her has been helpful.

I want to refer briefly to the Prime Minister’s serious youth violence summit, which she set up to explore the public health approach further. I joined her at the opening session, which brought experts, politicians, young people and community workers together to tackle the issue. The four-day summit saw real results, including the creation of a new PM-chaired ministerial taskforce, which met for the first time last Wednesday. This will drive forward work across Government, supported by a new Cabinet Office team to help to deliver key actions. Alongside this, I will continue to chair our serious violence taskforce, which has met nine times over the past year, with members including the Met Commissioner and the Mayor of London. The taskforce will complement the work of the PM-led group, providing fresh ideas and external challenge as we unite against serious violence.

We are acting on every level to try to stop the senseless violence. It is my duty as Home Secretary to keep our streets safe, and serious violence is a threat that I refuse to ignore. Much has already been done, but we cannot fix this problem overnight. It is vital that we remain united against this deadly threat. Every child deserves a better future and the freedom to live without fear, and we must deliver. I commend this motion to the House.

3.31 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): This is a very important subject, and it is at the forefront of many of our constituents’ minds. The House respects the fact that the Home Secretary chose to open this debate himself, even though we may not agree with some of his conclusions. Up and down the country, communities are haunted by the fear of the rising tide of violent crime. This is happening in metropolitan areas such as London and Birmingham, as well as in cities such as Grimsby. The fear and the concern are universal. Generations ago, young men solved their disputes with their fists. Nowadays, the same disputes—even the same criminal interactions—are settled with guns and knives.

The fear in the communities is threefold. First, there is the threat to yourself. We heard earlier about the tragic death of a man in Anglesey who was killed by a crossbow, and we hope that the Home Secretary will look into the regulations on crossbows. Secondly, there is the fear that your child could be the victim of violent crime. As a long-standing east end MP, I have sat with too many mothers who had said goodbye to their son in the morning as they saw him off to school or college, only to get a call from the emergency services later telling them that their son was dead. When you have sat with so many of those mothers, you understand how harrowing violent crime is for our communities. Thirdly, there is the fear that your child could be a perpetrator. It can be almost as traumatising to discover that your child is involved in violent crime as it is to find that they have been a victim. It is almost inevitable that there will be more deaths from violent crime this weekend in one or another of our great cities.

I have to begin by talking about the effect of the Government’s policies in the round. Violent crime does not happen in a policy vacuum, and the Opposition contend that the Government’s austerity policy has contributed to the causes of increased crime in almost every conceivable way. That is one reason why the Government have presided over a rise in violent crime. Ministers cannot be right in saying that the rise in violent crime is all down to better recording. If someone is a victim of violent crime, that is one crime that they will report and that will be recorded.

We have heard about some of the extra money being spent on different initiatives, particularly the £22 million for the early intervention youth fund. However, as Opposition Members have said, that does not begin to offset the cuts in youth services up and down the country. I stress to Ministers that it is not a choice between targeted intervention and a properly funded general youth service: we need both. If the money goes into just targeted interventions, the danger is that those young people feel stigmatised and do not want to engage. Ministers talk as if, on any given estate, a couple of guys are on the verge of committing some terrible violent atrocity, and for all the other young men on that estate, everything is just fine.

In our communities, on our estates and in other communities, young people need a properly resourced general youth service, not just because someone is on the verge of committing a criminal atrocity, but because, sadly, in the 21st century, with the break-up of the nuclear family and many mothers out of work who might not choose to be out of work, many young

men—and women—need to interact with role models, particularly male role models. That is what the youth service offers. It is not just a question of dragging somebody from the brink of violent crime.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): I speak as a former Connexions manager. The Government have cut £880 million from youth support services. Those cuts have consequences. They come on top of the several hundred million pounds cut from public health—the Secretary of State spoke about a public health approach—and the loss of 21,000 police officers, 7,000 police community support officers and 15,000 police staff. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those cuts have consequences?

Ms Abbott: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an important intervention. I will return to the question of cuts having consequences later.

Huw Merriman: I sense that the shadow Home Secretary will not agree with me, but to try to take the party politics out of the discussion, it is worth considering that back in 2008, when there was no austerity, there were 272 knife-crime-related homicides—too many. Last year, there were 285—too many. By 2015, when the right hon. Lady could argue that austerity was at its height, the number had gone down to 186. I am appealing to her to look at the subject a little more holistically rather than considering just financing.

Ms Abbott: This is not about party politics for me. It is about the lives of people I live among—my friends' children's lives and the lives of some of the women and children on the street where I live in Hackney. The hon. Gentleman denigrates the issue by reducing it to mere party politics.

Huw Merriman: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not making a party political point. My point was that we do not need to be party political because the figures have fluctuated under different approaches. I think that perhaps the shadow Home Secretary is confused about my point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): That is not a point of order. I think the hon. Gentleman will try to catch my eye later and he could deal with the point during the debate. I really do not like points of order in the middle of debates—they just disrupt the proceedings. We are having a serious debate, so let us get on with it.

Ms Abbott: I do not think I was confused at all. I know the point that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle is trying to make, and my point is that this is so much more than party politics; it is people's lives.

Dr Huq: My right hon. Friend is making a moving and powerful speech. On the subject of party politics, does she agree that this is not even a political choice for councils anymore? Councils of all political complexions are cash strapped. Youth services in Labour Ealing have been cut by 50%, but in Tory Hillingdon, the borough of the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, youth services have been cut by 85%. This Government said austerity is over; they need to put their money where their mouth is and reverse those local government cuts.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and this is not just an issue for councils of a particular political colour. Austerity is hitting the ability of councils of all political colours to deliver the services we need to effectively combat violent crime.

Stephen Doughty: My right hon. Friend is making a strong, powerful speech, and I agree that this goes well beyond party politics. It is about our communities and the challenges faced by the young people who live in them. My dad was a youth worker for many years in Cardiff, and he trained youth workers across the city. I have three local councillors who were fantastic youth workers in my community, and the one thing I hear from all of them is that because young people spend the vast majority of their lives outside school, youth services are even more important.

Why do we not consider making youth services statutory? Instead of them being a Cinderella service that is always cut, always slashed and always bearing the brunt of austerity, with devastating consequences for young people's lives and opportunities, we should start taking them seriously and provide a serious youth service for all young people.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the importance of having statutory youth services, and more so because most young people spend most of their life outside school, which is why a properly funded youth service is so important.

The Home Secretary has announced another pot of funding for young people's advocates, but that does not begin to compensate for the thousands of community police officers who have been cut. I would say that community police officers, inasmuch as they engaged with families and young people in the community on a day-to-day basis, were very much the frontline against criminality, including violent crime.

This Government, and this is a fact, imposed austerity on the police, which led to falling crime detection rates. Crime prevention efforts have also been undermined, partly because of the cuts to community police officers.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Detection is obviously essential, as is getting weapons out of circulation. The Metropolitan Police Commissioner says she is in favour of stop-and-search as a means of getting those weapons out of circulation. Does the right hon. Lady back that call?

Ms Abbott: Absolutely. I have always argued that evidence-based stop-and-search has an important role to play. The Opposition fully support targeted, evidence-based stop-and-search. What has proved problematic in the past is non-evidence-based, random stop-and-search. I accept that one thing that has helped in the use of stop-and-search, as the Home Secretary says, is body-worn cameras, which minimise accusations on either side—by the person who has been stopped and searched or by the police officer. Evidence-based stop-and-search is a good thing; random stop-and-search has a very chequered history of exacerbating community tensions.

Janet Daby: Does my right hon. Friend agree that some families and young people do not complain about stop-and-search, or indeed about police behaviour, for fear of reprisals? I would have thought the Home Secretary would be aware of that.

Ms Abbott: Sadly, there are still tensions in many of our communities between young people and the police. Those tensions will be easier to deal with when we have the right levels of police funding and the right number of police officers. I do not doubt that my hon. Friend is correct when she says there are young people who do not necessarily report the injustices they think they have experienced.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The shadow Home Secretary talked about the right levels of police funding and police officers. Can she tell me what the right level of funding is, given that she voted against this Government's increase in funding to the police?

Ms Abbott: People should stop using that old Whips Office line. The reason we voted against the Government's proposal on funding was that we did not think it was enough money. Hopefully, nobody will raise that point again.

Government austerity has contributed to increases in the factors underlying the causes of serious violent crime, undermined prevention and cut police numbers, so there are inevitably fewer arrests and convictions. Ministers and other Members will say that the Government have recently increased spending on the police. In real terms, if we take away the precept, and once the cost of police pensions is taken—[*Interruption.*] We are talking about central Government funding. The problem with the precept, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) will perhaps explain to Conservative Members, is that it inevitably falls more heavily on poorer areas than on wealthier areas. We are saying that the claims about increased spending are not as impressive as they might seem, once we take away the cost of police pensions, which had to be met, and once we realise that much of that increased spending actually comes from the precept rather than central Government spending. In any event, this is a sticking plaster on a gaping wound—a wound inflicted by the Government's own cuts.

The National Audit Office, which I hope will not be accused of being party political, has previously shown that central Government funding for the police has been cut in real terms since 2010. Offensive Weapons Bills and knife crime orders are one thing, but communities also need actual police officers in place to make use of those new legislative options.

It should be clear that Ministers are in danger of tying themselves in knots. On the one hand, they have tried to insist in the past that there is no correlation between the cuts they have imposed on the police and rising serious violent crime. On the other hand, the Home Secretary has boasted to us today that the Government are now providing more resources to the police. Which is it? Do police resources and police strength have anything to do with rising crime and falling arrest rates? Or are the recent, relatively modest resources provided to the police purely decorative and designed to get Back-Bench Tory MPs off Ministers' backs? Are they supposed to stop the crisis in funding and police strength getting worse? If so, is that not a tacit admission of the huge damage that Government cuts have caused?

I have mentioned the overall cuts in central Government funding for the police. However, as was mentioned earlier, the head of the National Crime Agency says that an extra £2.7 billion is needed to tackle organised

crime. As it happens, that is close to the amount that has been cut from the police budget since 2010. We also learn that there is now a cost over-run in the emergency services network of £3.1 billion pounds. Ministers have not yet come to the House to explain that and what they intend to do about it—and that at a time when billions have been cut from police budgets.

The effect is clear. In March 2018, there were 122,400 police officers in the police forces of England and Wales. That is a fall of 15% since March 2010, or a decline of 21,300 officers. All the new law, all the new orders, all the committees and all the reviews in the world cannot compensate for losing 21,300 officers. It is also relevant that the rate of those leaving the police force has almost doubled since 2010. Stress and overwork are taking their toll on under-resourced officers. There are now fewer police officers in England and Wales than there were in 1982. Of course, the under-resourcing of individual forces by this Government means that some forces are in an even worse position.

Stephen Doughty: I thank my right hon. Friend for being generous in giving way. She is talking about the underfunding of specific forces. Does she share my concern that, as in the case of South Wales police, and particularly of Cardiff, as a capital city, which has particular challenges because it is a seat of government, hosts major events and so on, there is often a real knock-on effect on our community policing, which amplifies the effect of the cuts? That is despite the strong efforts of South Wales police, which has been arguing with the Home Office for months and months now for some additional funding for Cardiff's capital city responsibilities to free up the capacity of community policing to deal with serious violence on our streets.

Ms Abbott: I visited Cardiff last year, and the senior police officers and the police and crime commissioner put to me the case for more funding. That case is well made.

On the question of knife crime, as of March 2011—not long after the coalition Government took office—there were 30,600 offences with a knife or sharp instrument; by 2018, that total had reached more than 40,800. That is a rise of nearly a third. In the latest year, there was a 12% increase in homicide, even if we exclude the cowardly terrorist attacks in Manchester in London. It is an appalling record; it is actually shameful. Government cuts have consequences. The Home Office's own data shows that almost half of all crimes are closed with no suspect identified. In the past year, the proportion of summons or charges fell from 11% to 9%. That means a reduction of summons and/or charges in 41,000 individual cases. Police strength does have an impact in the fight against crime. Cuts do have consequences.

I have long taken an interest in disorder and crime—since long before I had the honour to represent my party on home affairs from the Front Bench—and my view on serious violence is, as with all policy matters, that we should focus on what works. From the inception of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow, we have seen a system that works: homicides due to knife crime in Glasgow have plummeted. We welcome the £80 million that the Chancellor has provided in funds for the new violence reduction units—it is a policy that we have long advocated on the Opposition Benches and we are pleased that the Home Secretary is copying the Labour party—but violence reduction units alone are not enough.

The Glasgow violence reduction unit was established when public spending was rising under Labour. The allocation of the latest funds takes place as austerity still rules. That means that poverty and inequality will continue to rise, as will zero-hours contracts, no proper apprenticeships and the burden of student debt. Pupils continue to be excluded, and find themselves in pupil referral units. The Government have a failed drugs policy combined with police cuts. We argue that the underlying causes of crime, and the opportunities for crime, are rising, and the prospect of criminals being caught are falling. More money for violence reduction units is welcome, but while austerity continues, they are unlikely to be as successful as they could be. As money is trickled into violence reduction units, the Government have carved a big hole in the bottom of the bucket with austerity.

When it comes to law and order, the Government cannot take with one hand, with the big cuts in local authorities, and give with the other, through individual pots of money for things such as violence reduction units and the youth endowment fund. Those individual pots of money do not begin to compensate for nearly a decade of cuts to policing, to youth services and to mental health services for young people and adolescents, and Ministers should not pretend that they do. All the summits, the committees, the reviews, the new legislation and even a new statutory duty cannot compensate for an overall lack of resources.

As for the public health approach, in her evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, Chief Constable Sara Thornton stressed the importance of strong drive, co-ordination and a concerted approach, if the public health approach was to succeed in England. Chief Constable Dave Thompson of the West Midlands police pointed out that, although the Home Secretary's strategy alludes to a public health-based approach, it is not yet a public health-based strategy. There is next to no mention of violence in Public Health England documentation, including in Public Health England's outcomes document. I understand that there is a consultation going on, but people will not take this Government seriously on a public health approach until that begins to be reflected in the actual practice and the actual close working between Public Health England, education and the NHS.

Violent crime haunts our communities. We argue that it is not just a failure of individual boys, young men and, increasingly, women, but an overall failure of Government policy, and it is partly caused by austerity. When it comes to violent crime, words are easy, but providing the proper resources and taking the right actions are difficult. I argue that, as we move into a weekend where, inevitably, we will hear about more violent crime and more knife crime, it is well past time that the Government left behind words, good intention and pots of money and showed genuine intent and provided the genuine level of resources that are needed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I have now to announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day. In respect of the question relating to the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations, the Ayes were 294 and the Noes were 184, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

3.56 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to be called so early in this debate.

Violent crime is a matter of serious concern to every Member, and increasingly so to my constituents in Solihull. Although we rightly cherish our town's reputation as a fantastic place to live—it often tops the polls of the best places to live in the United Kingdom—there is no getting away from the shadow that such offences cast over my community, and that has increasingly been the case in recent times.

Since the start of last year, the local press has run a series of stories on a spate of terrifying armed carjackings across the wider borough of Solihull—not just in my constituency but in that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). I mentioned in Prime Minister's questions the murder of a mother and daughter in Shirley. Just on Saturday, a man and a 15-year-old boy were shot in broad daylight. Fortunately, in this case, the police reported that the pair received only leg injuries, but it could easily have been very different.

These are not isolated cases. The west midlands has some of the highest knife crime figures by population in the entire country—98 offences per 100,000 people against a national average of 69. The 2,850 recorded knife crimes represent a 72% increase in just four years. Meanwhile, earlier this year, new figures revealed that gun crime across the region had risen to its highest level in years, with 681 recorded instances—the highest figure reported since 2010-11. Sometimes the sterility of raw statistics hides the true human cost of this sort of crime, but there was no masking my horror when, in March, *The Guardian* revealed that there were almost 700 child victims of knife crime across the west midlands last year, as well as more than 800 young people caught with a knife. Of course, this problem is not confined to the west midlands, and the Government are right to make the matter a national priority. The serious violence strategy, backed by tens of millions of pounds of Home Office funding, is just the sort of broad-spectrum approach that we will need to make the sort of progress that this country expects, nay demands.

The emphasis on prevention and early intervention is particularly welcome. As I know from my experience with the efforts to combat homelessness in Solihull and the wider west midlands, it is nearly always more effective—not to mention more cost-effective—to solve a problem before it starts. We must pair these measures with a renewed commitment to effective rehabilitation. I am all for putting public safety first and helping those who deserve it, but we have a duty to ensure that the criminal justice system does not just erode someone's prospects of legitimate employment while honing their criminal skills. We need to look again at strategies such as stop-and-search, ensuring that we are not allowing good intentions and dogma to undermine effective policing.

The serious violence strategy is a chance to lead the way, and I look forward to giving it my full support, but these things cannot be solved by Whitehall alone. Any effective strategy will require the full participation not only of the Government and the police but of devolved decision makers, third sector specialist organisations, local communities and volunteers. I pay tribute to the many volunteers in my constituency who play a role in

[Julian Knight]

trying to stop this epidemic. It is almost as if my town exists because of a sea of volunteering—it is awash with volunteers. Yet in Solihull, too often all we get from the police and crime commissioner is excuses. I know from speaking to people on the doorstep that local residents are deeply concerned by persistent rounds of cuts to local frontline policing, and they do not understand how the PCC justifies it while sitting on enormous cash reserves of, as I understand it, over £100 million.

People are also furious at the decision to sell off our town's last police station, with no commitment that the money raised will be reinvested directly in policing in the town. I urge the Minister once again to reconsider that decision, especially in the light of the promises made to the people of Solihull during the closure of Shirley police station only a few years ago. Just to put this into context, 160,000 people face direct uncertainty over the future of policing provision in their borough. I understand that the site itself is potentially very valuable, and that it is frankly not as well used as it once was. I have also been given assurances by the chief constable that there is an intention to effectively migrate services to another front desk in the constituency, particularly in the town centre. However, the reality is that the services in the main police station have been wound down over time. That is key when it comes to intelligence, which is vital in combating knife crime and serious violent crime. I hope that this speech will be a further message to the police and crime commissioner, the authorities and the town of Solihull that we need a guarantee of a police station in Solihull to combat the rising tide of serious violent crime, which unfortunately seems to be coming over the border from Birmingham.

The concentration of police resources in Birmingham has continued despite the Government providing a funding boost to the West Midlands police. One of my constituents' biggest fears about devolution was the risk of seeing Solihull overshadowed by Birmingham, and it is difficult to argue that that is not the case given the actions of the PCC, who is taking police resources from Solihull and placing them in Birmingham. My constituents are doing what they can to plug the gap, with groups such as Shirley Street Watch bringing residents together and giving them a chance to make a difference, but they cannot hope to compensate for the sale and potential closure of all on-the-ground police bases in Solihull. The serious violence strategy will be seriously undermined if the police and crime commissioner does not reconsider his policies and listen to the people of Solihull.

4.3 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As we have heard in the contributions so far, serious violence is always an emotive subject for the public and for Members of this House. Sadly, given the recent knife crime epidemic in London and many other parts of England, it is an issue that we have had to discuss far too often in recent times. Of course, the adoption of the public health model to tackle serious violence in Glasgow and Scotland is not news to Members—indeed, it has already come up in this debate—but thanks to Police Scotland and the work of the violence reduction unit, levels of non-sexual violent crime have reduced significantly in Scotland, and the

approach has been welcomed and advocated by the World Health Organisation. That reduction has been most apparent in west and central Scotland, and in Scotland's cities more generally. Glasgow used to be known as the murder capital of Europe, yet it is now one of the safer cities in these islands. But despite this undoubted success, there is still a long, long way to go, and the Scottish Government are committed to tackling violent crime head-on, whatever form that takes.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): It appears that the Home Secretary may be leaving this debate while the hon. Gentleman is making an extremely important contribution on the public health approach. Does he agree that that is a very disappointing thing to see?

Gavin Newlands: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am not surprised, sadly, that the Home Secretary has left. I was surprised, though, that in his very long speech, much of which we can agree with, he made very little mention of the public health model. It took interventions from Opposition Members to try to draw out his opinion on the public health model, and that was a shame.

Douglas Ross: The hon. Gentleman is always very keen on parity, so just for reference and for *Hansard*, could he confirm where the shadow Home Secretary is?

Gavin Newlands: I have no knowledge, for the *Hansard* record, as to the location of the shadow Home Secretary.

Douglas Ross: She is not here.

Gavin Newlands: She is not here, but as the SNP spokesperson in this debate, I am not here to answer for the Labour Front Bench, to be perfectly honest. I shall move on from the issue of where Ministers and shadow Ministers are.

As I said, the public health model requires multi-sectoral co-operation. Violence is a complex issue that comes in many forms and encompasses, but is not limited to, verbal, physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Only by tackling the causes of violence, not just the symptoms, can we break the cycle of violence and reduce the impact that it has on individuals, their families, and all our communities.

The Scottish crime and justice survey shows, as of 26 March, a 46% fall between 2008-09 and 2017-18 in violent incidents experienced by adults in Scotland. Violent crime is rare, with just 2.3% of adults experiencing it in the latest year—down from 4.1% in 2008-09. Police-recorded non-sexual violent crime remains at one of its lowest levels since 1974. Emergency admissions to hospital due to assault have more than halved since 2006-07—down by 55%. Emergency admissions due to assault with a sharp object have also fallen substantially in that period, and the number of homicides has more than halved.

Those stats clearly highlight some fantastic progress on this hugely important issue, but it is not enough. Too many people, particularly young people, are still being admitted to hospital and still dying. We must do more; we cannot simply rest on our laurels.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend has made excellent points about the statistics on hospital admissions and hospital visits. Does he agree

that the Navigator part of the violence reduction unit's programme, whereby interventions are made in hospitals and people are given the option to get out of a life of violence, has contributed to the reductions he mentions?

Gavin Newlands: Absolutely—I could not agree more. That speaks to the multi-sectoral approach that I indicated. Although police numbers and so on are important, it is not just about police—it is also about how we tackle this in our schools and our hospitals.

We know that crime is experienced disproportionately across the population, with the poorest and most disadvantaged being far more likely to be on the receiving end. The Scottish violence reduction unit is working with partners to develop innovative approaches to improving outcomes for individuals, families and communities. In the past decade, the Scottish Government have invested over £17 million in violence reduction programmes, including over £3.8 million in the “No Knives Better Lives” campaign. We have invested £12 million since 2008 in the violence reduction unit itself, which includes funding to deliver the mentors in violence prevention programme, which encourages young people not to stand by and allow violence to happen to them and those they know.

The Scottish Government's implementation, with cross-party support in the Scottish Parliament, of an ambitious twin-track approach of pioneering violence prevention programmes, coupled with enhanced penalties and tough enforcement, has helped to deliver huge falls in violent crime over the last decade. Penalties for possession of a knife are higher in Scotland than in England and Wales, with a five-year maximum term, versus four years in England and Wales. The average length of custodial sentences for knife possession has increased by 85% since 2007-08, with the average sentence now being 421 days, up from 228 days in 2007-08.

As I said, a large part of our success in Scotland has been down to the violence reduction unit, which aims to deliver that reduction by working with partner agencies. Its motto, “Violence is preventable, not inevitable”, is simple but thus far has proved accurate. Influenced by the World Health Organisation's 2002 report on violence and health, the VRU became the only police force in the world to adopt a public health approach to preventing violence. That includes prevention activity such as education and early intervention, coupled with appropriate law enforcement as necessary. In treating violence as essentially a disease, the VRU sought to diagnose the problem, analyse the causes, examine what works and for whom and develop specific and bespoke solutions that, once evaluated, could be scaled up to help others. That approach has undoubtedly helped and been admired elsewhere.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree with what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the public health approach. Does he agree that there is a lot to be learned from the devolved Administrations? In Wales, there is excellent partnership working between South Wales police and our local health boards on a series of issues relating to violence—not only violence in our cities at night but domestic violence, with thousands of women now being protected as a result of partnership working between the health boards and policing.

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. As I will come on to say, the Scottish Government and Scottish politicians are always looking elsewhere for better ideas and fresh thinking. In recent times, the UK Government have started to open their eyes and mind a lot more to policies of other Governments, including potentially looking at a presumption against short sentences. It is a shame that the Secretary of State has moved on from the Chamber, so we will have to see whether that progresses, but the Government are to be commended for moving on from their closed approach.

The public health model and the violence reduction unit have worked so well that they are now being tried and tested elsewhere. Most notably, Sadiq Khan has taken forward a VRU here in London, which we very much welcome. I hope it is allowed to be effective and is resourced appropriately, as far too many young people are losing their lives on the streets of London.

Any legitimate and full discussion of serious violence must recognise the scale of gender-based violence. Scotland is not exceptional in the sheer scale of this disease, but the Scottish Government are committed to tackling it root and branch. Conviction rates in this area sit at their highest ever levels. Clearly there is still work to do, but victims are now more likely to come forward and report abuse and violence.

The 2017-18 recorded crime statistics included 421 new crimes of disclosing or threatening to disclose an intimate image. The recording of those new crimes is due to the enactment of the Abusive Behaviour and Sexual Harm (Scotland) Act 2016, passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament. About 25% of the increase in sexual crime in 2017-18 can be directly attributed to the new intimate images offence. The Scottish Government set up an expert group last year to identify fresh actions to prevent sexual offending involving children and young people, after commissioned research found an increase in cyber-enabled sexual crime between 2013-14 and 2016-17. Those crimes, such as communicating indecently or causing others to view sexual images, typically have younger victims and offenders when committed online.

Police Scotland has a national rape taskforce and rape investigation units within every division, dedicated to investigating rape and serious sexual crime. The Scottish Government are investing an additional £1.1 million to improve how sexual offences cases are handled and improve communication with victims, and a further £2 million to speed up access to support for those affected by rape or sexual assault. That will bring total investment in Scotland in tackling all violence against women and girls to at least £25 million over the next three years.

Sexual crime is a crime of the utmost seriousness, and a type of crime that disproportionately, perhaps overwhelmingly, affects women and girls. Often sexual crime and gender-based violence stem from ignorance, because of a lifetime of unchallenged views and attitudes among men—attitudes that are often exacerbated by peer groups. We need to challenge the sexist attitudes that support this most heinous behaviour.

I am proud to chair the all-party group on the white ribbon campaign and to be an ambassador for White Ribbon UK and White Ribbon Scotland, which is to be commended for its recent work with bookmakers across Scotland in educating customers and getting them to sign the white ribbon pledge. I urge everybody, particularly

[Gavin Newlands]

all the men present, to make sure they sign the white ribbon pledge never to commit, condone or excuse gender-based violence.

The SNP Scottish Government are leading the way on evidence-based, progressive policy in tackling serious violence. The scale of Scotland's success is in many ways astonishing. Much of the credit goes to the violence reduction unit—including its co-founders, Karyn McCluskey and John Carnochan—and of course to Police Scotland. However, this success itself comes with a recognition that we must keep trying harder. Indeed, John Carnochan has himself said recently:

“There is a danger people think Scotland is fixed—it is far from being fixed”.

He is right. As I said earlier, too many young people are still being hospitalised and too many young people—too many people—are still being killed. We have made fantastic progress, but there is still a lot more to do. The public health model, when implemented and resourced properly, is effective. I am confident that it will continue to grow and develop in Scotland, but we are always looking elsewhere for fresh thinking about and approaches to many of the challenges we have heard about and undoubtedly will hear more about as the debate develops. In that spirit, I hope that Members and Ministers from elsewhere will continue to look to Scotland and learn from our experience.

4.16 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). It is important that he highlights the success, as others have, of the violence reduction unit in Scotland. As he says, it is a model that has been praised across the country and across the world.

Importantly, we must recognise that it is not the answer to all our problems. I do not think that that is what he was suggesting. When I questioned witnesses at the Home Affairs Committee, it was clear that we can learn from it—there is no doubt about it—but to say that it is the answer to all our problems would be gravely wrong. We look at good practice across the country and across the world, which is important, but we should not just say, “Well, if it works in Glasgow, it can be moved down to London”, because, for example, things that Police Scotland does in Glasgow do not have the same positive impact in my constituency of Moray. We have to remember that there are different solutions for different problems across the country.

It might seem strange for a Scottish Member to be speaking on an issue that is largely devolved, but I am a member of the Home Affairs Committee, and this is an issue that the entire Committee takes very seriously. I look forward to listening to the Chair, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), and other members later.

I did think that it was important to contribute to a debate on this subject. It is important that this debate is being held on the Floor of the House of Commons. I agree with the shadow Home Secretary that it is welcome that the Home Secretary led this debate for the Government and the shadow Home Secretary led for the Opposition. Only when we get the top players in this entire Parliament discussing this issue of grave importance will we give it

the respect it is due. The fact is that we have dedicated so much time to it on the Floor of the House of Commons, and there is clearly interest across Parliament and from various different MPs across the country.

We listened to the Home Secretary, and in multiple interventions he was challenged on what the Government are doing. We also listened to what the Opposition are doing. This is a serious issue—it is a matter of importance for the entire country—but I will be honest: I have been disappointed by the contributions so far from those on the Opposition Benches. [Interruption.] I am sorry if that disappoints the shadow Home Secretary and if my disappointment in her is disappointing, but I have to say that all we have heard today is problems, not solutions. She says there is not enough funding for x, y or z—I intervened on the shadow Home Secretary when she was saying we need more police officers and more funding for the police—yet the Opposition vote against such funding because it is not enough. It might not be enough in the eyes of the Opposition, but surely it is better than what they are currently saying is not enough. Any increase should be supported across Parliament. It seems very hollow outside Parliament for them to try to explain that they believe there should be more funding for the police—more resources going into the police, more officers employed, more youth workers, more x, y and z—yet when there are opportunities to support the Government on a cross-party basis with increased funding for these vital resources, Opposition Members vote against that.

I shall speak briefly about the public health approach and the joined-up approach. When, last week, the Minister appeared before the Committee, I put it to her that it is positive that we can get Departments working together on such a crucial issue, but that there is a risk that when a cross-Government approach is adopted there are too many people in charge and no one takes overall responsibility. Is violent crime the most important issue for the Education Department or the Health Department or the Home Office? At times there is a need for leadership, and I worry that by taking too much of a public health approach—by combining all the Departments to say “this is a priority”—we could lose some emphasis and some leadership.

I nevertheless support the Government's approach. We have joined-up working so we can also have joined-up understanding and joined-up solutions. On balance I think it is the right way to go, but we must always remember the potential pitfalls. I worry that if an issue becomes a priority for all areas, it can become a priority for none.

The Home Secretary and others mentioned drugs. In some parts of the country there has been significant success in tackling drugs. However, as a constituent mentioned to me recently, when there is a big drugs bust and drug dealers are brought to task by the police, sentenced and removed from the community, we should not suppose that demand for drugs has reduced, because it has not—it is simply that the supply of drugs at that point has reduced. Our local papers, certainly in Moray, understandably write very positively about big drugs busts that succeed in getting drug dealers. Such busts are very rare in Moray—we live in a very safe part of the country—but when they occur the local papers praise the police for how much they have done to remove those people from our streets. However, we have

not removed the problem. More must be done to enable us to understand the underlying reasons people use drugs and why there is a need to tackle those drug dealers. As I say, a drugs bust does not get rid of the demand; it only reduces supply at that point in time.

County lines took up a large part of the speeches by the Home Secretary, the shadow Home Secretary and others. The problem seems to have increased unbelievably over the past few years. As the Home Secretary mentioned, the current estimate is that in 2019 there are 2,000 county lines in operation across the country. Just four years ago, in 2015, the National Crime Agency was saying that only seven police forces were affected by county lines. By 2017, that had increased to every police force in the country, and it is incredible that there has been such a large increase in county lines in such a short time.

I welcome the approach the Government have taken to tackle that issue, because it affects every single constituency. A crime that begins in London can rapidly end up in Aberdeen, and if it is in Aberdeen it can quickly spread to Moray and other parts of the country. Something that we believe is a crime problem in the south of England can, because of county lines, quickly become a crime problem across the country.

Young people are intrinsically involved in the problems we are experiencing with serious violence and, I believe, in the solutions to serious violence. At the Home Affairs Committee about three or four weeks ago, one of our fellow MPs was appearing before us as a member of the panel of witnesses, and she made it very clear that Members of the Youth Parliament had voted knife crime their top campaign issue. Despite that, we, as members of the Committee—I would be interested to hear the remarks of the Chair of the Committee—have not questioned or listened to young people. We take panels of senior police officers or experts in their fields—the Children's Commissioner, the Victims' Commissioner and others—but we do not hear directly from young people.

Yes, it is important that we, as Members, can stand up in Parliament and express young people's thoughts, and pass on what they have said in the Youth Parliament, and the fact that they have made knife crime their top priority, but surely we should also be listening to them directly—listening to their concerns, listening to what they have to say, and listening to their solutions. It would be very useful to hear from the Youth Parliament in this inquiry and in other inquiries going forward. When some young people gave us a confidential briefing, that was perhaps one of the most enlightening aspects of our evidence session on serious and violent crime.

That brings me to my final point. I often refer to my interest outside Parliament in sport. The young people we heard from, who were involved in the programme and wanted to speak to the Committee anonymously, felt that sport could have done so much to take them away from a life of crime. When they got into a life of crime and serious violence, it was sport that they were able to focus on to ensure they got out of that habit.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend may have caught the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report on the social impact of sport. It can help young people and it can help reduce reoffending. One issue I have is that

there is not enough joined-up thinking in the criminal justice system in relation to participation in sport and its help in reducing reoffending.

Douglas Ross: I welcome my hon. Friend's point. The focus on reoffending is most important. When the Minister gave evidence last week, I think she had recently been speaking to the Premier League about how we use sport as a tool to work with young people. So much sport goes on every day of the week all across the country. There is untapped potential to use sport as a key to improve our relationship with young people.

Rushanara Ali: I know the hon. Gentleman is a recent addition to the House of Commons, but in the 2010 Parliament the Government cut school sports funding, a provision that benefited all children up and down the country. It feels like we are back to square one. Conservative Members talk about the merits of school sport and sport generally, but we have actually gone backwards because of those cuts.

Douglas Ross: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, but we have to be very careful that we do not just rely on the Government to pay for everything. For example, we have extremely rich football clubs in this country. Surely they can put their resources, which they gain from fans week in, week out, back into the communities they serve. One of the most disappointing things we heard from the young people who spoke to us was that they could see the major football stadiums from the communities they lived in and were victims of crime in, but could not find a way into those football stadiums to get any benefit from them. I sometimes think we rely too much on Government intervention, when the private sector—clubs and so on—could do far more to work within communities.

I know that many Members wish to speak in the debate, so I will bring my remarks to a conclusion. I agree with the Home Secretary that this is a national emergency. It is right that the Government have highlighted it as such and are working across Departments to deal with it. It is right that we are debating it on the Floor of the House of Commons today. I hope that communities affected by serious violence—individuals, families or communities at large—take some comfort from the fact that this issue is being debated in the House of Commons and is of such serious importance for Members on both sides of the House that something is being done. Unless we work on this issue within Government, across Government and across Parliament, we will not make an impact.

We have seen that just one life lost is one too many. We are seeing too many lives lost as a result of serious violence. I believe the Government's strategy and their emphasis on getting it right will save lives in the future. That is surely to be welcomed.

4.28 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), a fellow member of the Home Affairs Committee. I apologise to the House that he and I will probably have to leave shortly, as we have an evidence session with young people this afternoon. He rightly says that we should do more to make sure young

[Yvette Cooper]

people's voices are heard, not just in our Committee but in all Committee inquiries and in all the work we do across the House.

This is a deeply serious issue. Lives are being lost and families devastated. Too often, parents end up fearful and children at risk. In West Yorkshire, knife crime has doubled since 2010. It has gone up by 20% in the past year alone. Across the country, we see a similar picture. It is not just in our biggest cities but in our towns, often spread by county lines. The most disturbing figures are those showing that since 2012 the number of children and young people under 16 admitted to hospital for knife wounds has doubled. One of the NHS consultants we heard from said that the peak time was between 4 and 6 in the afternoon—after school, when children have just finished a French, history or maths lesson and should just be going home, but find themselves caught up in violence instead, and do not make it home.

The Home Affairs Committee launched its inquiry into serious violence before Christmas. We will draw our conclusions together shortly. I will not pre-empt the conclusions, but I will reflect on some of the evidence we have heard. I start with evidence from young people and youth workers, who told us how many young people do not feel safe on the streets after school and think the only way to feel safe is to carry a knife. They do not see the police as people they can turn to. They do not have police officers that they know in schools. They do not have outreach workers, youth services or safe spaces to go to. The greater risks are for those young people who have been excluded or who might be vulnerable in different ways; those who get caught up in drug networks, county lines or gangs.

We were struck by the evidence from the police, who evidently are working immensely hard to tackle the problem but are undoubtedly overstretched. They can operate targeted, intelligence-led policing, but they find it much harder to provide and resource the neighbourhood police officers or school-based officers who might help to prevent some of the violence in the first place. Having seen their work over the years, I find it particularly troubling that we have lost so many school-based police officers, because they can often build up trust and relationships, gather intelligence, and simply work on prevention and practical messages for young people about how they can stay safe and build their confidence in their lives and not fall into patterns of violence or become vulnerable. I was struck, too, that although the Met has had big reductions in its number of school-based officers, it is now trying to increase the number of officers based in schools because it sees their value. In the west midlands, they told us that they did not have any police officers based in schools and had no prospect of being able to provide them.

There is undoubtedly an issue about whether the resources going into tackling serious violence match the scale and urgency of the problem, and whether the scale and pace of the early interventions the Government have talked about match in any way the scale of the violence and the number of lives being lost. We have seen many worthwhile targeted projects, but they have simply too narrow a reach; they do not reach enough young people or communities, so they cannot tackle enough of the problem. Equally, although the police do

some excellent work in tackling some county lines networks and drug networks, that is not able to match the scale of the problem.

I want to talk in particular about co-ordination and leadership concerns. Whatever the level of resources, there are key challenges around co-ordination, drive, urgency and leadership. We heard considerable evidence from a range of witnesses who believed that the Home Office should do more. When the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), gave evidence, I asked questions about how many young people the Government were trying to reach. The Government have rightly talked about a public health strategy, and the definition of such a strategy is that there is a defined population and an intelligence and data-based approach. I therefore welcome the points the Home Secretary made about increasing the level of evidence and data we have, but I was concerned that, in that evidence session, neither the Minister nor the officials gave us a clear sense of how many young people the Home Office is trying to reach with its strategy and what scale of intervention we should expect to see over the next three months, the next six months and the next 12 months. This problem is acute—lives are at risk—so we need clear objectives, a clear sense of progress, a clear sense of direction, and action to make sure things are happening and being delivered.

We were concerned to discover that there was no clear sense of who would be responsible in each area. Who in the west midlands, in West Yorkshire, in Bedfordshire will be driving the action to tackle serious and violent crime in their area? Will it be the police and crime commissioner? The chief constable? The Mayor? The leader of the local council? The chair of the safeguarding board? There is a clear need for co-ordination in every area if we are to bring all these different organisations together.

I welcome the Government's talk about a duty on public sector institutions to have regard to the risk of serious violence and the impact of knife crime, but simply having a duty when there is no framework to co-operate and co-ordinate is not enough; there must be practical mechanisms to make sure things change. There has to be someone the Minister can ring up to say, "We've seen your figures are going in the wrong direction. There is a growing problem in your part of the country. What are you doing to sort it out?" The Minister needs to be able to ring someone up, ask what is happening, get the feedback and make sure action is being taken to protect young people.

I know the Minister was going to a meeting after the evidence session, so she may well have made further progress. I hope so. If the violence reduction units—in those areas where they are to be introduced—are not to be in place for another six months, I would like to know who will be leading the work in the next six months to make sure young people are protected and that action is being taken in a co-ordinated way between the police and other organisations to tackle some of these awful crimes?

Let me quote some of the witness evidence to the inquiry. Sara Thornton said:

"I think that where we have so many young people dying in our streets, we need a much more concerted response from Government."

Sir Denis O'Connor, who is a former chief inspector of constabulary and was involved in previous programmes to tackle knife crime and street crime, thought that the strategy was

“much more concerned with its narrative and less with action”.

The Met Commissioner told us that

“we are not yet seeing real cross-Government action being delivered in a meaningful way on the ground and in our communities.”

Dame Louise Casey, who was also involved in previous Government programmes, described the Government's strategy as “woefully inadequate”.

The Government have some very good intentions on this—they have set out a strong sense of concern and commitment to tackling knife crime—but the challenge for the Home Office is to make sure it has enough urgency, that its sense of determination matches the scale of the problem and that the partnership between all Departments is tight enough and strong enough and has enough follow-up to deliver action on, for example, the number of young people being excluded from school—some of whom are very vulnerable—and to take action in hospitals. The Redthread programme is extremely good, but are enough hospitals involved in such early intervention programmes? We need partnership working in communities and investment in wider universal youth services, as well as some of the targeted work.

In the end, we will save lives only if organisations work together, but for them, working together, to have an impact there also needs to be strong leadership from the Government and the Home Office. I hope we will see that leadership over the next few months. The Select Committee looks forward to scrutinising this work further as part of its work.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggest that if every Member takes about 10 minutes, everyone will get in.

4.39 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to follow the Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

I welcome this debate, which is timely—in fact, it is overdue. We need to debate this subject regularly because it is something that our constituents around the country are focused on. They see people in their communities, particularly young people, being badly hurt and losing their lives because of this terrible epidemic of serious violence. That is not to say that such things have not happened before, or that serious violence is something new; of course it is not, but it is right there now, and it is affecting our constituents throughout the country. It can be seen in the broader context of serious crime, and I hope we will have a full-on debate on that. Although that often results ultimately in serious violence, it does not always do so, but it affects our constituents nevertheless.

In Staffordshire, we have seen an increase in knife crime over the past few years. In 2017-18 there were 1,175 knife crimes, an increase of 22% on the previous year. Staffordshire police, whose area also covers the Stoke-on-Trent city authority area, have done a great deal to tackle the problem, and I congratulate them on that, but there is a huge amount more to do. In March this year, in Operation Sceptre, the police concentrated on both enforcement and education, and in my speech I want to focus on education and prevention.

Staffordshire has the same problems with county lines that are being experienced in other areas up and down the country. I do not pretend to have great knowledge about the whole issue of drugs. I believe that there are many views on what is best, and I am willing to listen to the evidence, but we need to debate that issue more in this place. The criminality surrounding drugs is a huge problem for the country, and it needs to be discussed. We need to see resolute action and a policy that is stuck to over the years, so that the scourge of illegal drugs, involving both the users and those involved in the trafficking, are eliminated or at least minimised.

If we look across the Atlantic to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, we see that they have a number of helpful proposals for prevention. I shall list them all, because they are brief, and I shall then concentrate on two of them. They are prioritising the family environment, which has been mentioned by several Members; quality early education and early intervention; strengthening young people's skills; connecting young people to caring adults and activities; protective community environments—the physical environment as well as the more general community environment—and intervention to lessen harms and prevent future risks.

Let me start with strengthening young people's skills and connecting young people to caring adults and activities. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) mentioned the importance of a holistic approach to the provision of young people's activities, and I agree. When I was a little younger than I am now, I worked in and supported two youth clubs in Hackney. One was a statutory, open youth club in Homerton, which provided a very good, if sometimes difficult, environment. The other, a voluntary youth club in a church in Clapton Park, was open to many young people experiencing severe challenges. Both those clubs—difficult types of club—really helped. They were not run on a nine-to-five basis; the youth workers were there for the young people at all hours of the day or night, and that is absolutely vital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) mentioned football clubs. With colleagues, I helped to run a Duke of Edinburgh's Award youth programme at Arsenal football club for a number of years, and that was very good. Other football clubs around the country commit great resources to such programmes. However, this is not just about providing a good environment, although that is very important; it is also about strengthening young people's skills. That can, of course, be done in schools, and I am passionately committed to seeing life skills taught much more in our schools, but it can be done in youth centres and youth clubs as well. As the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington said, youth clubs also connect young people to caring adults, and to the role models, some of them male, that young people so desperately need. In that regard, they play an extremely important role.

The second area is prioritising the family environment. I welcome the work that Sure Start centres have done over the years, which is being progressed in family hubs. Those family hubs will be important. The work that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has done alongside Lord Farmer, David Burrowes and others is vital.

I urge that all of us, across the House, see family hubs as incredibly important parts of our local communities, where not just children from zero to five but young

[Jeremy Lefroy]

people all the way up to 19 are given the opportunity to come together with their families, and perhaps mentors, to discuss the problems in the families and to see the opportunities that are available to them in a positive and affirming environment. So often, young people are given a negative approach. Most—I am sure all—hon. Members present feel a real sense of hope about the future of our country when they see the qualities of the young people they come across on a day-to-day basis. They must be affirmed, however, and family hubs are a place to do that.

As I have said, we need to debate serious crime and serious violence more often. If we do not, we are failing our constituents and particularly our young people, on a matter that causes heartache and heartbreak every day, week and month in communities across the country.

4.46 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Through my work with the Youth Violence Commission, I have spoken with many young people whose friends have been stabbed; with the grieving families of victims; and with the traumatised friends of perpetrators. If we trace the lives lost to violence, or to long prison sentences, back to childhood, we hear familiar stories of domestic abuse, neglect, childhood trauma and school exclusions.

Let us take one child, who I will call Jack. Jack's father is unpredictable and often violent. His mother self-medicates to cope. She has few friends in the area where they live. She does not know her neighbours and she is financially dependent on Jack's father. From an early age, Jack witnesses his mother being beaten and abused by his father. As a small child, he is withdrawn, anxious and has trouble sleeping.

When Jack starts primary school, his teacher notices that he struggles to concentrate most days. Sometimes he seems utterly sleep deprived. He is often late in the morning and falls behind with his school work. Jack struggles to keep up with his classmates, and feeling anxious about that, he starts to become more disruptive.

By the time Jack starts secondary school, things have become worse. The police have been called to the house on several occasions, and Jack has been referred to social services. At 13 years old, things have become so bad at home that the courts grant a court order and Jack is taken into care. He is placed with a foster family, which costs the council approximately £27,000 a year.

Jack struggles at school. He finds it hard to concentrate and he is behind his classmates, so he increasingly skips school. When he is there, he has a reputation for being disruptive and aggressive. That behaviour leads him to be suspended on numerous occasions until, at the age of 14, he is permanently excluded from school and sent to a pupil referral unit, which costs an average of £17,000 per pupil per year.

Shortly afterwards, Jack assaults a boy who ends up in hospital with various injuries. He is now known to the police and receives a warning. The cost to the police and the criminal justice system of responding to a single such crime is approximately £2,500. The immediate cost of health services for the victim is nearly £900. Jack is then referred to a youth offending team, which costs

about £1,500. For a while, things get better. After moving placements several times, he settles with a foster family and he does not reoffend for a year.

Shortly after turning 16, however, he goes to a party and a heated argument quickly descends into a fight. Jack struggles with how to handle his emotions, and he stabs another boy. He did not expect this to be fatal, but two days later the victim dies in hospital from his injuries. Right now, at this point, we have lost two young lives. The devastating loss of these two lives is felt not just by the families but by the whole community and across society as well.

The overall cost to the hospital is more than £2,000. The cost of services to the victim's family is about £6,000. After a trial by jury, which costs upwards of £150,000, Jack is sentenced to 15 years in prison. The average cost per place per year in a young offenders institution is £76,000. The average cost of a single homicide to the police is more than £11,000, and to the criminal justice system it is more than £800,000. Then there are the further hidden costs of a homicide. They include the lost earnings of the victim and the perpetrator and of their families, as well as the cost of the impact on the victim's family and friends' mental health, and the cost of the fear of violence and the trauma of the wider community. In total, the Home Office estimates that one homicide costs society more than £3 million. We have one boy dead and another boy in prison. By the time he is 18, Jack has cost the state nearly £4 million in interventions from the police, social services and youth offending teams, and in costs to the NHS, the local council and the criminal justice system.

Now, let us start the story differently. Let us add in some true early interventions. Imagine that we have another child in similar circumstances: let us call him John. When John's mother is pregnant with him, she attends a Sure Start centre in her local area. The family centre gives her advice on family health, parenting, employment and training, and it is a good place for her to meet other expectant mothers. When John is born, she continues to attend the centre regularly, to see her friends and to get advice on parenting and child health. On average, the programmes cost around £1,000 per year per child.

Things at home are not easy. John regularly witnesses his father being physically abusive to his mother, and he is an anxious toddler as a result. At the children's centre, one of the health visitors notices that John's mother has signs of physical abuse and reports this to social services. The centre is aware of this and keeps an eye on her, and the group of friends that John's mother has made at the centre are supportive. Unfortunately, she ends up in hospital, but the centre still supports her in leaving her partner. It refers her to a refuge, and the training on offer at the centre helps her to find a part-time job. The place in the refuge costs £52 a day, and the training costs £1,000.

The children's centre is connected to a maintained nursery school, which John attends when he is old enough. At nursery he develops his communication skills, and by the time he is four he is seen as school-ready. He is more independent, and has strong social skills for his age. As a result, he settles in quickly and makes friends, and he can keep up with his peers throughout primary school. Generally, things with John and his mother are much more settled by the time he starts

secondary school. His mother is working full time, and after having had to move several times between friends and temporary accommodation, they have now been living in the same place for a year. The secondary school that John attends has a school nurse and strong mental health support, meaning that the teachers have time to work with and support all the children. The school has a zero exclusions policy as a result. The school nurse costs the school around £40,000 a year.

John's mother works late, so after school he attends the youth centre down the road with his friends. As he gets older, the youth centre is also able to provide him with skills training and advice on work experience. The school has a dedicated police officer attached to it, who John and his friends occasionally play football with at lunch and confide in if they are concerned about something. The partnership between the local police force and John's school has also been beneficial for the police. In building up trust with the pupils and their parents, they are able to obtain information about vulnerable children who are at risk of being groomed by gangs. This partnership usually costs about £50,000 a year.

John still suffers with anxiety and occasionally has problems controlling his temper, but the school has the internal resources to support him and he receives mental health support for managing his temper.

When he reaches the end of year 11, John leaves school with five good GCSEs. He has a part-time job and has got into a local college to do business studies. He has also become a peer mentor in his youth centre and supports other young people. Based on the crude estimates I have outlined in this story, the cost of that early intervention is about £170,000. The cost of failure for Jack is more than 20 times that amount.

An early intervention approach will not only save money; it also has the potential to save many lives. We know that early intervention is key. A strategy based on very early intervention and wraparound support would not only reduce violence but have wider benefits for society and the economy.

Research shows that adverse childhood experiences or traumatic incidents in childhood can have a lasting impact in adulthood. Compared with people who have no ACEs, those who have four or more are seven times more likely to be involved in violence, four times more likely to have a low level of mental wellbeing and 11 times more likely to be incarcerated. As MPs, we need to be far more aware of this. In an attempt to raise the profile of that, I am writing to all MPs to ask them to complete a short online survey on how many ACEs they have. I hope that that will focus some minds.

We have to stop just talking about early intervention and start genuinely resourcing and delivering it. A true public health approach should focus on that, because every life is precious and our young people deserve the best start in life.

4.56 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I was going to name-check her at the start of my speech, but as she has now spoken, I can express my thanks not just for the way she tirelessly campaigns and demands that we debate the matter in Parliament, as we are doing today, but for her

speech. She brings so much substance and experience and so many ideas to the debate and I am very grateful to her. In that spirit, I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), who is not here. She chairs the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime and has brought so many people into Parliament for us as MPs to listen to. She deserves tremendous credit.

If I may spread my love to the Scottish National party Benches, I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), whom I was able to introduce to my constituents when she gave her views to them on the public health approach in Glasgow. I also thank Government Front Benchers. The Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability, who is now on her own on the Front Bench, has given me a lot of time and shown a lot of patience, it is fair to say, with some of my ideas, and I am grateful to her. Her shadow, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) also brings much passion, compassion and intellect to this arena. I therefore believe that, cross-party, there is an opportunity for us to try to drive for more.

My reasons for speaking on the matter are my huge concern about where we are and my desire that we do more. I spent five years working in Brixton and Camberwell Green for a youth centre where I was a manager and a trustee. We were able to make strides in interventions for young people who were either going off the rails or were likely to do that due to their family backgrounds. We were able to intervene and provide them with a safe space and activities such as sport, art, environmental activities and horse riding. We had some great successful groups.

The youth centre was interesting because it had no Government or local authority funding. We fundraised. I spent all my time, in the days before the internet, going through the books, seeing whether I could get money from, for example, the Guinness Trust, Peabody and other groups that would fund us. We were successful in getting the funding. We did not want to be funded by local authorities. Lambeth offered us a small amount of money but we realised that all the entrepreneurship and the way in which we wanted almost to be run by our young people would be sucked out if we had to tick all the local government boxes.

I am therefore genuinely reflecting on the fact that youth centres and the current model are perhaps not the best model. The Home Secretary mentioned the 100 new OnSide youth opportunities. That gives us a chance to set up youth organisations that young people really want rather than what they are told can be provided.

I am also mindful that we have talked about cuts and austerity. Of course I recognise that there is an implication if the funds are not there, but I have cause to reflect on the situation in 2008 when the then Mayor, Ken Livingstone, lost his position very much as a result of the anger that knife crime had got out of control. A new approach was brought in, and I was chatting earlier with the Minister for Housing, whose role it was under that Administration to drive the Met police to do more. He had great success in helping the police to set up Operation Trident, and he made sure that the police's feet were kept close to the floor. He had photos in his office of all the young people whose lives had been tragically lost, so that when the police came to meet him, they were reminded of exactly what their duty should be, which is of course to protect the public.

[Huw Merriman]

As well as talking about resources, we should talk about how current resources are used and whether we are getting everything out of all the responsible organisations. Of course, in addition to resources, it is a question of powers, and I welcome the fact that the Offensive Weapons Bill is about to become law. I am particularly interested in the knife crime prevention orders, which are undoubtedly a roll of the dice. They are unproven, but the key thing is that the Met police and the Mayor of London have asked for them. There is a feeling that if we do not make an early intervention to stop people being in certain spaces where we have evidence they should not be, or to stop people organising themselves on social media, where we see huge issues of people being inflamed and provoked, we will lead ourselves into endemic knife crime. I am very supportive of these initiatives and, in her summing up, I am keen for the Minister to tell us when we will start to see those orders being used.

I am also a firm advocate of the use of section 60 stop and search powers. We had 1.5 million stop and searches in 2008, which is arguably too many. They have now been targeted but, at 300,000, there is an argument that there are now not enough. We know that 17% of stop and searches lead to an arrest, so they do have some impact.

I will give some time back to the House, because the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford, quite rightly having been such an earnest campaigner, took a little more. I am grateful to the Government for taking the steps they have taken, and I want to see us continue with the public health approach. It is exciting to follow what has been done in Glasgow and, looking back 20 years, in Chicago, where the public health approach was first pioneered. There are some great steps.

We need to make sure that we work with all the providers and establishments, particularly the public sector key workers who will be so critical to whether this is a success, in order to join up the schools, the health service and social services. That will take a lot of time and we need to take them with us, particularly when it comes to their new duty to inform.

I am grateful for the steps that the Government have taken, and I hope we can continue to work on a cross-party basis to make sure that more lives are not blighted. We talk about Brexit far too often in this place, and the Benches are packed when we do. If we look around the Chamber today, we see there is hardly anyone here. These issues cost lives and ruin the lives of families, and the fact that MPs are not taking it seriously enough to be here to speak up for their communities is not a good look for this House.

5.3 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is clear from this debate, and from the experience of our constituents, that the Government are losing the war on violent crime. A generation of young people in urban and rural areas is growing up in fear of violence, in fear of knife crime and gun crime, and in fear of losing their lives on the very streets on which they live.

Knife-related homicide is at its highest level since recording began in 1946. Some 285 people were killed with knives and sharp instruments in 2017-18, and there

were 18,000 assaults and 17,000 robberies involving a knife or a sharp object in the year to September 2018, as well as 3,000 threats to kill. It is not just knives, but guns too. Last year, gun crime increased by 11%, to 6,604 recorded offences, compared with 2016. It has not always been like this. In the past eight years, knife crime in Tower Hamlets has increased by 34%, from 794 offences in 2010-11 to 1,065 offences in 2017-18.

Each and every incident is horrific, as has been highlighted by many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue. Each murder creates a shattering lifetime of grief for the friends and family of the victim. Each wounding can change lives forever, causing physical disability and mental trauma and reducing life expectancy. However, these incidents also have a deeper impact on our society, as others have mentioned. The increase in violent crime creates a climate of fear and suspicion. It adds to anxiety and has an impact on mental health. It creates a divide between the generations and between communities. It drives a wedge into our society, and makes us distrustful of our fellow citizens and apprehensive about entering public spaces.

Why is this happening? There are those who claim that it is all down to an increase in reporting, as the shadow Home Secretary pointed out. Of course, that would be entirely welcome, but it does not explain the spike in numbers. A number of my hon. Friends have pointed out some of the underlying causes, and we do not need a degree in criminology to understand what is going on here. In particular, there are major factors in play that, whether the Government recognise it or not, relate in part to the erosion of the resources and support available for young people, which can be seen from Sure Start to youth services, school sports, education, further education, those with special needs, children in care, and children at risk of being excluded from school. In those and a number of other areas, young people's support networks and the resources available to back them up, help them achieve and help them realise their potential have been shattered. Instead, young people are victims of crime and, at worst, face death as a consequence of knife crime and other violent crime. That is a waste of talent and potential in our society, and it creates fear and has an impact in the wider community as well.

Funding for local authority children's services has fallen by £3 billion since 2010. Since 2010, hundreds of millions of pounds have also been axed from youth services; as has been mentioned, there has been a reduction of 138,000 in the number of youth service places and an overall cut of £760 million. Some 3,600 youth workers have been lost from our communities; those people help to support our young people, but they are no longer in those roles. Central Government funding for youth offending schemes has also halved, from £145 million in 2010 to £72 million in 2017-18. So it is not by accident that we have ended up here. These catastrophic cuts have contributed to undermining support, and they are underlying factors in what has happened and in the rise in violent crime.

That is not to mention the significant cuts in policing. In London, numbers have fallen below 30,000 officers. There has also been a cut of 6,800 in police community support officers, who have been the backbone of community

policing. They spot problems early and work with young people and other services in a multi-agency approach to support young people before they get into further trouble and face the threat of violence, or end up being groomed by organised criminal gangs and drugs gangs and facing the same plight as so many young people who have lost their lives. In London, we have lost a third of police staff posts as well.

In my constituency and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, we had 125 police community support officers in 2010, and the number went down drastically to just 27 in 2017. That is a 78% cut, and such cuts have consequences. Combined, the boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Hackney—they have had to merge into a borough command unit, partly because of the cuts—have lost 500 officers in the past nine years. That has a consequence. The idea is that by adding a plaster to the wound with some additional funding here and there the Government can reverse the damage that those massive cuts have had over the past few years, but frankly that is tinkering around the edges. It is just not going to address the major problem of violent crime that we face in our society.

We need to look into where legal changes might be necessary, but it is really important that the Government do not respond in a kneejerk way and return to disproportionate stop-and-search policies that end up turning communities, particularly the black and minority community, against the police. The use of stop-and-search must remain proportionate and safe, people must be protected, and innocent people must not be caught up in it. We have to make sure that we invest in police services, and in our young people through youth services, Sure Start centres, children's centres, holiday projects, boxing clubs and other sports facilities, on the scale that is required. We need to invest in drugs action teams, which have lost funding. In constituencies such as mine, they have been doing incredible work to prevent young people from returning to gangs. We also need to deal with addiction issues and mental health projects, because funding for child mental health programmes has been cut. All these are interconnected issues. The joint approach—the public health model—is important, but it has to mean something. Just calling it the public health approach without backing it with resources is not going to work.

There is rightly general consensus that we absolutely have to deal with the terrible issue of serious violence, which is affecting our constituents and the whole of society. I am sure we all now have a greater fear of violent crime than we ever did, because this is happening in our communities. It is happening to people we know, their family members or their relatives. I know that through my work in my constituency: murders have taken place in our borough and there are reports of knife crime almost on a weekly basis. We need the Government to put in the investment and act, and we need to ensure that we do everything possible to prevent further deaths.

5.12 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a short contribution to this debate. There have been excellent speeches from many Members, but I wish to pay a particular special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford

(Vicky Foxcroft) for her moving and thought-provoking speech, for her work in speaking out about the rise in knife crime, and for subsequently establishing and chairing the Youth Violence Commission, which has been crucial in looking into ways in which not only the Government but all areas of society can help to tackle knife crime and youth violence.

I appreciate that the focus today may be on serious violence in the major cities, but I wish to put on record what is happening in Gwent, and particularly in Newport, as sadly none of our communities is immune from serious violence. It affects us all. We are also seeing the emergence of county lines as a serious threat, and an increase in the level of serious violence that comes with that. Drug markets generate violence and a crime hierarchy, with our most vulnerable young people groomed to enter the lower levels of drug distribution.

I am grateful to be able to say that in my constituency knife crime may not be as big an issue as it is elsewhere, but serious and organised crime, and its association with violence, has to be approached as a priority. The Minister for Security and Economic Crime will be aware of some of the fantastic prevention and response work that is happening in Gwent, as he spoke at the launch of the serious and organised crime strategy at the Celtic Manor in Newport last week. I praise Gwent police and Chief Constable Julian Williams for their successes in bringing criminals to justice and taking drugs off our streets. They have dismantled a number of organised crime groups in the past six months and made 163 serious organised crime arrests, and they have seized about £600,000, 50 high-value vehicles and hundreds of kilos of class A and B drugs.

As we all know, we need to keep on our guard and invest in our young people. As our police and crime commissioner, Jeff Cuthbert, said last week, serious and organised crime affects all communities across Wales and no single agency can resolve the problem alone, as we have talked much about today. That is why, in Gwent, partnership work has been so important. Dismantling crime groups has been backed up by a multi-agency approach to identify and work with vulnerable individuals at risk of criminality and violence, which is a need that the Youth Violence Commission and yesterday's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee report have identified. The Home Office has funded the post of serious and organised crime co-ordinator—one of only five in the country—which will have an impact on the tackling of serious violence as well as organised crime.

Gwent police is currently working in partnership with Newport Council, Barnado's, Newport Live, St Giles, Crimestoppers, MutualGain and the Welsh Government on prevention, intervention and community resilience. What does that mean in practice? It means that sessions have been delivered to more than 5,400 pupils in all of our Newport schools on county lines, gangs and violence, with follow-up advice encouraging people to report their concerns. There has been intensive training for youth workers, social workers, teachers, housing officers and many more. Police and local authorities are working closely together to identify those children most at risk, with early intervention work by Barnado's, Families First and St Giles.

A large range of diversionary activities are going on through the Newport Live Positive Futures programme. Its evening sport sessions—we talked a lot about sport

[Jessica Morden]

today—are in the right place and at the right time of the evening. They are hugely successful, with more than 20 sessions running a week in Newport alone. Some attract up to 70 young people in a session. The programme also takes referrals for one-to-one mentoring and personal development, again using sport and physical activity as a hook. They have seen young people, through sport, gain qualifications and go on to further education. The scheme is working to divert young people from a path that could lead to violence and crime.

There is a huge amount going on. I wish to put on record my thanks to all those involved in the work in my community. It is partnership work at its best. This is new work, but we are already beginning to see individuals that it has helped. Lives are changing as young people are being helped to avoid a life of crime.

There is great expectation that this early intervention work will be an investment in young people's futures and in preventing crime and violence. Although I am proud to be able to highlight this work today, there is still the reality that we talked about earlier—that partnership working requires time, staff and resources from each and every agency involved. With these strategies in place, I hope the Government will consider the potential of just what could be achieved if the backdrop to this were not thousands of officers being cut from the police and councils having to lose thousands of staff. The point has been well made today about the lack of youth provision and the fact that crucial statutory and non-statutory services are at breaking point. With significant investment in the police and local authorities, preventative action could be one of the answers to much of the youth crime and violence that we see.

We need the urgency and determination that my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) spoke about earlier on, and we hope to see more action from the Government.

5.17 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It was good to see the Home Secretary in his place today. I know he is sincere in his attempts to deal with this issue, but, as many of my hon. Friends know, what we are trying to say to the Government and to the Home Secretary, as one of the most senior members of Her Majesty's Government, is that we do not see any urgency. The Home Secretary should be here in this Chamber week after week after week. We have been demanding that he comes here for months. Although it was good to see him, the country would have expected the senior politician responsible for dealing with knife crime to be here, and I will not stop saying that either to him or to this House.

We face a national emergency; there is no argument about it. Every single Member who speaks on this issue talks about the national emergency that our country faces. Never has knife crime been at this level since records began—never. Homicides with respect to knife crime are rampant. Young people, particularly in London, but not exclusively, are being slaughtered on our streets.

All that is taking place, yet the Home Secretary comes to this House only now and again. He talks about the knife crime summit, but I have not got a clue

what the knife crime summit is. I have read the written statement, but where is the opportunity for Members of this House to ask the Home Secretary time and again what is happening, what is going on, what is working and what is not? That opportunity is not there. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and others have raised this issue time and again. It is not good enough.

Yesterday, the National Crime Agency told the Government not that it wants a few million here or a few million there, but that it needs £2.7 billion to tackle the issue. That is not the Labour party or anyone else trying to score party political points; it is the chief executive of the National Crime Agency telling the Government that it needs those additional resources to tackle the serious crime that this country faces. Two thousand county lines now exist, and the number is growing exponentially. This Chamber should be roaring with disgust at the fact that county lines are operating in every single part of our country—not just in London and the big cities, but in coastal towns and rural areas. There are 2,000 county lines, and a senior officer who appeared before the Home Affairs Committee a couple of weeks ago said that an estimated 10,000 children are involved. That is an absolute disgrace. Where has the Home Secretary been? He has just been banging his fist on the Dispatch Box, saying on behalf of the country that he is not going to accept it.

As I said two or three months ago, if there were a terrorist attack, the resources and cameras of the nation would be focused on that. This Chamber would be packed with Ministers—starting with the Prime Minister—queuing up day after day to lay out, quite rightly, how we were going to defend our communities against the terrorist threat. Nobody is saying that that should not happen. Make no mistake, of course that would be the right thing to do. But where is the same passion and urgency from the Government when so many young people and others have been stabbed to death, shot or affected by violent crime? Every single community is affected—10,000 children. Where is the passion and desire to do something about it?

When we start cutting the numbers of police officers, youth workers and so on, it does create a problem. I will just leave that point for the Government to reflect on. Every single constituency in this country is affected, including the Minister's. She will not go into the next election saying, "We've got too many police officers." Every single person in this country is saying that we need more police officers. It is a no-brainer. We do not need a review or research into the issue; we need police officers on the street.

This is a national emergency. I have said it before and I will say it again: Cobra should be meeting to deal with it. The whole apparatus of the state should be operating to get at people, not at the kids who are just carrying drugs. Of course, the kids have to be sorted out and stopped—that cannot be allowed to happen—but where is the effort to bring down the big criminal gangs and the people running these operations?

People in estates are terrified. They are more frightened of the criminal gangs than they are of the police. They are more frightened to give evidence to get these people prosecuted than they are of the legal apparatus of the state. It cannot go on. No wonder people sometimes turn around, look at me—I do not want to offend

anybody, so I will use myself as an example—and say, “Does Vernon Coaker know what he is talking about? Does he know what we are facing in our community? Does he understand what it’s really like on our estate? He says that we should go to the police, but where is he going to be at 9 o’clock, 10 o’clock or 11 o’clock, when people wait outside our house and intimidate us? Is he going to be there protecting us?”

It cannot go on. I do not want to paint a picture of a country completely out of control, but in some parts of our country the situation is simply and utterly unacceptable. The whole apparatus of state should be getting in there and sorting it out. I am not prepared to see 10,000 children—children!—left operating under county lines; and the number will grow unless we get hold of it.

Clearly we need more police on the street, and £2.7 billion, as Lynne Owens has said. Where are the Government in this? The Home Secretary should have been banging the desk and saying, “As a result of this serious violence debate, I’m going to go and see the Chancellor.” The whole House will support the Home Secretary if he goes to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and says that he needs masses more money to deal with this problem. It is a national emergency and money should not be an object. We would support him—I would support him—in demanding that money for policing. I would also support him in demanding extra money for the youth workers and the community workers—for opening the youth centres and helping young people excluded from school. Where was he in banging on the desk and demanding that from the Chancellor? The Chancellor will come along, I guarantee, and put in a couple of hundred million here, or £30 or £40 million there, spread over five years, and people will have to bid for it. It is not enough. It is not sufficient to meet the scale of the problem.

Every single Member in this House, whichever side they are on, including you, Mr Deputy Speaker—I know you are neutral, but this applies to you as well—will have in their constituency community organisations and youth groups that work with young people who are challenged and difficult. In Nottingham, to give three examples, we have the Nottingham School of Boxing, the Pythian Club, and the Groundwork Greater Nottingham Trust. They are scrimping around for money, yet they are some of the most effective people in stopping young people becoming captured by the criminals or getting them out of criminality. They cannot get a few pounds—it is unbelievable. It is pathetic. I do not care what the Chancellor says about his fiscal rules. They are scrimping around for a few quid to keep their hall open, yet they are sometimes the most effective people at either preventing our young people from getting into crime or helping them to get out of it.

Why does the Minister not bang on the desk and say, “I’m going to look for parliamentary support to bring the urgency to this debate that is needed”? Cobra needs to be called. This needs to be treated as a national emergency. The Home Office, acting in the interests of this country in standing up to the criminal gangs who are exploiting so many of our estates and so many of our young people, needs to say, on behalf of and with the support of this Parliament, “We’re going to go to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and demand the resources that this country needs to fight these criminals.”

5.27 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Change UK): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). I can only agree with the urgency that he injects into this debate and the focus that he brings to it. We hope to see exactly that focus from Government.

I want to read to the House an email I received that is very similar to emails I get on a very regular basis. It is from the north area basic command unit, Haringey and Enfield. It says:

“Dear Partner,

Please find details of a stabbing which occurred about 1347h on Tuesday 14 MAY 2019.

Venue: Durants Park, HERTFORD ROAD, ENFIELD, MIDDLESEX, EN3 5AJ

Victim: Male 17 years

Call received from the ambulance service, that a man had been stabbed. Victim was found with stab wound to his upper left leg and was conscious. He was taken to RLH”—

Royal London Hospital.

The next information usually says one of four things: if he is fortunate, his injuries are declared non-life-threatening; his injuries are life-changing; he is critical; or his injuries have proved fatal. I receive that email regularly, and often the victim is younger than 17 years of age. I very rarely received emails like that before a couple of years ago.

Many of my constituents tell me how worried they are about the rise in serious violent crime in Enfield. On Saturday morning, I held a community meeting on Enfield Island Village that was very well attended because it was specifically about serious violent crime, and particularly youth crime. There is huge concern among people for not only their own safety but that of young people, who are lying stabbed or dead on our streets. They have very good reason to be concerned. Stabbings and shootings relating to drug dealing and county lines activity, as well as muggings and robberies, have seen violent crime in Enfield soar by more than 90% since 2010—yes, 90%. If I had said 10 years ago that that would be the case, people would have thought it was a massive exaggeration.

Last year, more than 20 violent crimes against the person were committed every day in the borough of Enfield. Enfield has the third highest level of serious youth violence in the capital, and we have a problem with gangs, county lines, knife crime and organised crime. I know from meeting the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Cressida Dick, that tackling serious violence in Enfield is a top priority for the police. We have seen the deployment of extra officers from the Met police’s violent crime taskforce and the Territorial Support Group to help make our streets safer, but frankly, if an area qualifies for deployment of police from those two groups, it has a very serious problem on its streets. We should not have to rely on those specialist services. We need visible neighbourhood policing at the heart of our communities, because the best way to cut crime is to have more bobbies on the beat.

The creation of safer neighbourhood teams helped to cut violent crime across the country by over 40%, but those invaluable teams are now much reduced and under existential threat because of this Government’s irresponsible decision to slash police budgets. Since the Government were elected in 2010, the Met police’s budget has been cut by £850 million. Despite the recent

[Joan Ryan]

police funding settlement, the Met is still expected to make further savings of £263 million over the next four years, against the backdrop of rising crime. As we have heard, the National Crime Agency director has warned this week of the “staggering” scale of organised crime and lobbied Ministers for a doubling of the agency’s budget to tackle the threat. The staggering scale is no surprise to me or my constituents; I see it in these emails, we see it every day and we hear it from young people.

Politics and governing are always about choices and priorities. When the Government force such staggering cuts to the police budget and fail to invest in the frontline, they are making a clear choice and reducing the priority they place on keeping us safe. The wholesale restructuring of London’s policing and the merging of boroughs’ resources, as in Enfield and Haringey, is a direct consequence of those cuts. That would not have happened if the resources were there to do otherwise. How is Enfield expected to cope properly with the surge in violent crime when we have lost more than 240 uniformed officers from our streets in the past nine years? That is just one London borough.

Our police are doing the best they can under very difficult circumstances, but when they are spread so thinly, they can only do so much. Over recent months, we have seen shocking cases of schoolchildren in Enfield Town being mugged, including students from Enfield Grammar School and other local schools. The headteachers, the local police and the council are working hard to keep pupils safe, but parents are at their wits’ end. These are secondary schoolchildren, and parents feel the need to take them to school and bring them home to keep them safe. Groups of parents have started patrolling the area after school to protect their children and deter criminals. They should not feel they have to do that—it is not their job—but I pay tribute to them for taking this action to try to secure their children’s safety. They deserve to know that the police services will be there when they need them.

When Ministers respond to this point, will they desist from always pointing the finger of blame solely at the Mayor of London for a lack of resources? It is the Government who have shifted the burden of police funding from the Government grant to the council tax, hitting the poorest the hardest. To fight violent crime there is little choice but to increase the policing element of the council tax, but I am afraid this cannot fill the gap in funding that has been opened up by the Government’s cuts agenda. Better resourced policing will play a major part in tackling serious violence. The Government must provide more support for other services, too. Huge Government cuts to our local authority, health services, youth services and public health budgets are massively compounding the problem.

North Middlesex University Hospital is at the forefront of dealing with the fallout from serious violence. In 2018 alone, the hospital treated 1,457 victims of assaults, including stabbings and gunshot wounds. It has had to ramp up its security spend, installing more CCTV and hiring overnight security guards in its already busy A&E department. Every penny that is spent on these interventions is money diverted away from essential patient care.

Leading crime prevention charities such as Safer London and excellent projects such as the Godwin Lawson Foundation and the Jubilee centre are working in Enfield, alongside local schools, in providing early intervention programmes and mentoring schemes to educate and support young people. However, as we have already heard from the hon. Member for Gedling, these organisations are working on shoestring budgets, and they need funding and support to scale up and focus on their work, rather than continually having to go out with the begging bowl. It is the first responsibility of Government to protect and safeguard the lives of their citizens.

I want to pay tribute to Inspector Paul Dwyer and PC Mansbridge of Enfield and Haringey police, who work with our young people in the north area basic command unit of the Met. Recently, they organised a charity youth football tournament, with 200 young people taking part in seven-a-side matches all day long, and the day communicated an anti-knife crime message.

We are proud of our young people, but we are not giving them the chance they need. I hope that Ministers will think long and hard about the issues that have been raised today by me and so many colleagues. They need to make it a priority to tackle serious violence and put the funding of our police, councils and public services back on a sustainable footing. Over the past nine years, we have seen this Government’s policy put the safety of our communities at risk. Enfield residents have the right to feel safe and be safe in their homes and in their neighbourhoods, and to know that their children are safe inside and outside school and in their parks, and to know that they have good activities—with good adult role models looking after them—that they can take part in. That is what we need; it is not rocket science. We all know it, and we need this Government to step up.

5.38 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I pay tribute to the excellent speakers we have heard so far, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who is no longer in her place. From the point of view of the lives of two young people, she explained the difference that adequate resources across swathes of the public sector makes to the life chances of children, as well as the cost to the public purse. I could not put it any better, and her speech will remain in my memory for a long time to come.

In my constituency in the past year, we have seen an increase in muggings at knifepoint. In March in Isleworth, a 17-year-old man was knifed and tragically died. It seems to be the case that most of the victims and perpetrators were teenagers, starting out on life. The perpetrators were known to some of the victims; they were part of a tit-for-tat feud, perhaps drugs-related. Other incidents were random attacks on young people for their phones or bank cards. Hounslow, my borough, has one of the lowest levels of violent crime incidents in London, but that does not really feel good to my constituents because violent crime has increased overall everywhere, including in Hounslow. At least the Home Secretary has admitted that fact.

The police have clearly been the focus of debates on violent crime and knife crime, which is where I am focusing my speech, but we cannot just talk about the police in terms of responses to persistent crime and

crime incidents, particularly in certain areas. Those responses work well where the police work with other agencies. For instance, following a spate of muggings on Chiswick back common, the public worked with police, the council, local businesses, youth workers and so on to find solutions, and it really worked. Between a public meeting held in December in response to the attacks and the follow-up meeting in March, the number of incidents had gone down to zero. However, the problem is that the police in London are working with one hand behind their back. Extra patrols in one hotspot are viable only until another hotspot is identified elsewhere and the police have to be moved on to work there. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford described the cost to the public purse and police time of every serious injury and murder from violent crime. She asked: could not that time—that resource—be better spent? Of course it could.

We are starting from the baseline of serious police cuts—3,000 fewer police officers in London, or more than 80 fewer in the Borough of Hounslow. We have seen a similar cut in the number of local police community support officers, so that the ward teams are less than half their strength in 2010. That is all as a direct result of the one-third cut in Government grant to the London Mayor's budget. By 2022, the Metropolitan police will have lost about £1 billion in funding since 2010. The London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, is doing what he can and he is contributing to frontline policing, but the scale of the cuts causes delays in responding to crime, less outreach and less community policing, where officers get to know the youngsters on their patch.

I am really pleased that the Mayor of London has adopted the public health model. He has learned from the experience in Glasgow, which has been mentioned. He has put some money back into the Metropolitan police budget—£234 million—which has brought back some extra police officers, but nothing like as many as we have lost. Even if the police were funded at the same level as in 2010, we all know that credible action by the police working in conjunction with others is not the solution. It may simply move the problem. Perhaps the police are successful and lock up serious offenders, which puts them out of action for a while, but actually, by the time the police are involved with a young person, whether the victim or an alleged perpetrator, it is too late. The police are dealing with the symptoms of the problems, not what has gone wrong.

To understand the impact of cuts in my constituency, as a result of the trigger-point incidents I have met local police, headteachers, school and college students, councillors and many others. I wanted to know what my constituents felt about the rising incidence of knife crime, so in April I hosted a crime summit in Isleworth—it was already being planned before the tragic murder. I am also currently distributing a crime survey to ask local people about their experience of serious youth crime, as well as their views on the causes and solutions and on support for young people and their parents. I have already received a lot of replies. People want action. They see the impact of crime on their community and on their children. They want to make a difference, but they want the Government to take action and to commit real funding to the places where it is needed.

In one response to one of the questions, "What do you think is the cause of the problem?" was written the word "criminals", but we all know that we cannot put

people into pigeonholes and define one group of young people as criminals and everybody else as the public. I think everybody in this debate and all the other respondents to my survey understand that. In the survey, the issue of police numbers was frequently raised. People know that the police are under-resourced and they see the pressure that is putting on services such as crime reporting, police-community engagement and so on.

The most common issue raised in the survey was the lack of and cuts to youth services. People see youth services as part of a range of solutions. They are not just something for children to do after school while they wait for their parents to come home. They are a place for children to socialise, meet responsible role models, learn a skill or a sport and touch base with somebody who can help them with their problems. They are a place for counselling services, homework clubs and so on. Those things need a base, which has to be open at the times and on days when children need them. I was very upset to hear a Government Member talk about youth clubs not being nine-to-five. Good quality, well funded youth clubs do not just open after school during the week; they are open at weekends and during the holidays.

As I said, my constituents do not label those caught up in crime as someone else's fault or as someone else's child. That became clear when several mothers raised with me their worries about their own youngsters, asking themselves, "Is my child at risk of getting caught up? Are they carrying a knife, whether for protection or planned use?" The reality is that it makes little difference if a child is maimed or killed. One other worrying thing we are finding is anecdotal evidence that, faced with stop-and-search, girls are carrying knives for the boys. Parents want a safe space to share their concerns about their children.

Young people told me that in almost all cases the youngsters they knew—they may or may not have been speaking for themselves—who were at risk or were involved in gang activities, carrying knives and so on, were doing so reluctantly. It was not their voluntary choice. They were often caught up in something. One example involved a young person who had no food at home because there was no money to buy food. Hanging around after school or college outside a chicken shop, somebody said, "You a bit hungry, mate? I'll buy you a meal." "Oh, okay, fine." That young person was then caught up: "When are you going to pay me back?" That is just one simple example of how easy it is for young people who do not have any money, who have time on their hands or are looking for role models, to get caught up in gang and non-consensual activity. That just illustrates why we need better quality early intervention.

Every headteacher and school manager I have spoken to over the past three years, often about school cuts, has told me that the impact of the real-terms cuts on their schools, including primary schools, has meant that too often they have had to cut services such as welfare, counselling, mental health support, affordable after-school activities and so on—all the things that they know keep children positively occupied. We all remember what a teacher said the other day on "Question Time" on the BBC when she challenged the Minister. She said that teachers know who these young people are, so they would prefer that, rather than giving them more work to do, the Home Secretary supported them in the work they are trying to do with the children who are vulnerable.

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

The silo nature of Government does not help. It is good that the Home Office team and their Opposition shadows are leading the debate, but where are the Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education or the Department of Health and Social Care? It is not just the responsibility of the Home Secretary and the Home Office.

Funding is at the centre of this issue across the country, whether in cities or towns, urban or rural areas, for local authorities, police services, charities or other services. My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (*Yvette Cooper*), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, said that the Home Office is providing new funds of around £35 million annually, but that should be set against the £768 million cut per annum on youth services across the country. The figures for all of the Home Secretary's wonderful new projects come to only 5% of the cuts made to youth services. Local authorities used to receive a substantial amount of their total income from MHCLG, yet those grants have been cut by more than 50%, and more in areas of greater deprivation.

As has been said in numerous debates in this place, cuts to local government have meant cuts to all services, particularly non-statutory services, of which youth services are among the most prominent. Let us have no illusions about these politically driven austerity policies. Austerity is not about economic necessity; it is about cutting the public sector. When the public sector is cut, there are cuts to youth services, police services, education and so on.

Early interventions, such as children's centres, basic welfare and early counselling, benefit most the young people who are at the greatest risk of being victims or perpetrators of crime. We need to see them restored. We need more school nurses and specialist mental health services in schools, as well as local counselling services. Cuts to leisure services mean that pools and sports centres may stay open, but only if the price rises beyond the pocket of young people from low-income families, so again they are excluded.

Too many communities are having to deal with the heartbreaking impact of violent crime, and the Government are still being too slow to act. I appreciate that the Home Secretary acknowledges the seriousness of the issue, but Ministers cannot just offer warm words. One-off funding announcements are a drop in the ocean compared with the funding lost to youth services, schools, colleges, the police and so on. That is the real issue that needs addressing. We need sustained investment in our communities in early intervention, youth clubs and frontline policing. The warm words of Conservative Members are meaningless when their austerity is the root of the problem.

5.52 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate following a visit to my local police station last week—in a professional capacity, of course.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): For a change.

Justin Madders: For a change.

Like the majority of hon. Members here, I have regular dialogue with my local police. Last week's conversation was mainly about what they had been doing to tackle a noticeable spike in youth disorder in Ellesmere Port in the last year or so. Indeed, recorded crime figures for Cheshire as a whole show a rise in public order offences of 55% in one year up to June 2018, which I found astonishing.

That meeting was useful as a constituency Member to hear not only about what they considered were the local challenges and hot spots, but about their wider perspective on what they consider their challenges and the impediments to doing their job. I was left with a strong impression that the police do a fantastic job. Indeed, as a result of the action they have taken through banning orders, dispersal orders and so on there has been a reduction in antisocial behaviour. Thankfully, in my constituency we have not had the epidemic of knife crime seen in many other parts of the country, but the disturbances we have had have been hugely destructive for those on the receiving end, and they have taken up a disproportionate amount of police time. The police are essentially undertaking a damage-limitation exercise. They have the dispiriting knowledge that they can haul in a young person for questioning and even go through the youth justice system, but nothing will change the behaviour of the hard core of youths until they are fully within the criminal justice system.

I understand that we need proper processes and justice, and that for most youngsters their first contact with the police will be their last, but I also know from what my local police say that they can predict with alarming accuracy which 14 and 15-year-olds they come across will be behind bars by the age of 20. That represents a failure not only of the criminal justice system but of our society. To understand the reason for that failure we must look not just at how these kids are dealt with when they come into contact with the authorities but at what drives them to the point where at the age of 14 there appears to be a sad inevitability about where their lives will end up.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (*Vicky Foxcroft*) said, we know that adverse childhood experiences can provide clues to adult behaviour, but we should also think about how decisions we make here have an impact. As we have heard from several Members, there is a clear link between the spike in youth-related violence in the last year or two and the decimation of the public sector that started just under a decade ago. It started with the culling of Sure Start centres, continued in the stretched social services, and ends with councils drastically reducing their youth provision. There is ample evidence of the damage done by austerity that does not appear on the balance sheet.

My local police have been doing a fantastic job with diversionary activities, and that has had some effect on reducing antisocial behaviour, but the point they make to me—and fairly so—is that every pound they spend on such activities is a pound less they can spend on putting bobbies on the beat. In the context of their having a net funding loss of £40 million since 2010, and with 200 fewer police officers and PCSOs since then, they know better than most that every penny counts. As we have heard, nationally we have the lowest numbers of police for three decades. Since 2010, we have lost

about 20,000 police officers. It is unsustainable to carry on in this way. As the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police said:

“I would be naive to say that the reduction in police finances over the last few years, not just in London but beyond, hasn’t had an impact.”

Yet here we are again talking about the same issues.

We have all paid a price for the police cuts; it is to the credit of the police that despite those cuts they have found funding for diversionary activities in my constituency. It is the sort of thing that should be provided by the council, but we know how many local authorities have had their budgets slashed in the past decade, as we have heard from many Members. On top of the increased demand on social care, such discretionary services are inevitably the ones to drop off. Figures obtained by the all-party group on knife crime show that the average council cut in real-terms to spending on youth services has been about 40% over the past three years. Some have actually reduced it by 91%. A study of local authority expenditure on youth services shows that it has fallen by £880 million in real terms since 2010-11.

There is a clear connection between where we are now and what has happened to public services over the past decade, but changes can be made that require not money but a different approach. There is a cohort of young people who feel they are untouchable, for whom the prospect of arrest holds no fear and the prospect of being taken home by the police and having to answer to their family is not a problem. These are the ringleaders, the hard core, who the local police tell me have to be taken through a series of hoops aimed at improving behaviour but for whom they know such voluntary interventions will do nothing until they get to the compulsory order stage. However, it can take up to a year before those orders can be obtained—a year during which the individual can continue to wreak havoc on their local community. We need earlier compulsory interventions: deal with the ringleaders early on and the rest will soon drop away.

We need to take a long, hard look at how we can do more to stop young people going down this road at a much earlier age. It means no more off-rolling by schools of difficult pupils; it means a joined-up approach by all those involved with families in need; and it means a more intensive focus on diversionary activities at a much younger age. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford said, we need to resource this properly and not just keep saying it is something we need to do. It is very clear what the direction of travel should be.

I want to say a bit about what is probably the most serious violence issue in my constituency, but one that happens behind closed doors. It is of course domestic abuse. It is all around us, but we do not see it. It is a sadly frustrating cycle of violence that people fall into and which seems impossible to break. There are issues around how we are unable to stop these things happening, and we ought to reflect on how we deal with them. In my police force area of Cheshire, there has been a 45% rise in violent crime in the last year. I do not know how much of that is down to domestic violence, but certainly the number of local authority safeguarding referrals which have included a domestic abuse element has increased significantly, and is well above the regional average.

If I can stand up here and say that there has been a 45% rise in violent crime in my police area in one year, that represents a crisis. It represents an emergency. It represents something about which we ought to be doing more in the House. I do not want us to reach a point at which stabbings and murders on the streets become the norm, because if we accept that as a society, we in this place have absolutely failed.

I agree with the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) about the empty Benches. That sends an appalling message about priorities in this place. It is clear from what Members have been saying that they believe there is a crisis that we cannot continue to ignore. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) mentioned the 10,000 children who are operating in county lines. A whole generation of kids have been written off because of Government inaction. As my hon. Friend said, this is an emergency, but because the Government have been eaten up from the inside by their own individual issues, they have become a dysfunctional, failing Government—a Government who have failed our entire country.

Crises of this kind, and the discussions that we are having now, ought to have a much better audience here, and much better action. The fact that we have such a shambolic, disengaged Government suggests to me that they have no right to be in charge of the country any more, because they have let people down completely. The idea that they are the party of law and order is an absolute joke. The messages that we have heard from Members on both sides of the House today need to be taken on board and acted on, because this is a crisis that we cannot allow to continue.

6.1 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak.

I want to acknowledge the speeches that have been made by Members on both sides of the House, but I particularly want to acknowledge the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), and the work that she has done in the Youth Violence Commission. I remember when she launched the commission, many years ago. At that time, I was the cabinet member for community safety in Lewisham Council. It was a well-turned-out launch—at London South Bank University, if my memory serves me correctly. My hon. Friend has given me a nod.

I also want to acknowledge the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker). One thing that he said really stuck in my mind. He said that some young people were more afraid of gangsters than they were of the police. That gave me a sense of the gravity of the situation, and of the pressure, manipulation and oppression to which young people are being subjected. We must not fall short of acknowledging that young people do not start out in life saying, “I want to get involved in crime. I want to carry a knife.” They start out in life saying, “I want to be a police officer”, or “I want to be a fireman.” They have dreams. We need to help young people to succeed in their dreams and their visions, and to make a way for them as much as possible.

When I consider serious violence, I often think about knife crime. I think about young people, their vulnerability, and the risk of harm to them and to others. However,

[Janet Daby]

serious violence is not just about young people, and knife crime is not just associated with young people. In London, we are seeing a lower volume of knife crime but a higher harm rate, which is affecting young people significantly and causing fatalities. Figures from the Metropolitan police show that in 2017-18 there were 14,700 recorded crimes involving knives or sharp instruments, the highest number over the last 10 years. The proportion of black, Asian and minority ethnic young people who have been victims or perpetrators of knife crime—or have been involved in “joint enterprise”—has also increased, which is of great concern.

Young people and knife crime are my focus. When referring to young black people's experience of the police, Robert Reiner, a retired lecturer from the London School of Economics, states that they experience over-policing and under-protection. I am genuinely concerned about the information that the Home Secretary has presented to us about increasing the section 60 stop-and-search powers.

The Scarman inquiry and the Macpherson inquiry talked about the tensions that can be created within communities and how they can affect our society. We need to think seriously about how we reach young people and help them to have trust in the police, so they go to them when they need their help. I do not think it is right to start on the offensive by stopping and searching young people. For me—I know there are many like-minded people and organisations—it is about building trust and relationships with young people, and about getting to know them. Only then will young people and their communities start to think and feel that they can go to the police when they experience harm or terror, which we need to encourage as much as possible.

I remember, as a young child, knowing my local bobby—I use that term endearingly. He used to come to our house and have a cup of tea. We all knew him and he was trusted in our local community. We had a very good experience of that. For that reason, we need more community police officers.

Some of the police's attitudes and behaviour towards young black people need to change. That is not a new phenomenon. All young people need to know that they can expect help, support and protection from the police. Instead of carrying a knife for protection, they should be able to seek police protection confidently, as I have mentioned. For many young people, however, that is far from the truth. There has been some progress in many police forces across the country, but borough commanders move so quickly from one area to another that they hardly have time to implement what they have begun.

Serious violence is a complex problem that is not only about policing; there are many other contributing factors. That said, as we have already heard, young people need to feel like they have a voice and that their views are heard and valid. We must also remember that they are young, even though they can look much older.

I welcome the Government's serious violence strategy, which the Home Office published last April. It attempts to look at the root cause of the problem and support young people to lead productive lives away from violence. Much more needs to be done, however, to support young people and their families where they experience

deprivation and disadvantage in our society. Much more also needs to be done for looked-after children and care leavers, who rank highly in our prisons.

That is why we need to consider taking a public health approach for our young people. The strategy has been praised for its focus on early intervention and prevention. It is a holistic approach to truly combating the problem, which involves families and issues such as identity, a sense of belonging and young people's wellbeing and mental health. It is about making structural changes to multiple systems and agencies, including the policing of young people, health services, youth services, housing, education and the criminal justice system.

I applaud Lewisham Council for developing its own public health approach against a backdrop of limited funds. In reviewing the public health approach, the Government might like to take some advice from our local authority about the strategy it has already developed. The public health approach needs to be taken more seriously, and there needs to be investment in youth services provision and the third sector.

Spending on youth services has fallen by 70% under the Government, which has affected the Grove Park youth club in my constituency. The club closed in 2013 as central Government cuts meant that the council could no longer afford to maintain it. Its catchment area encompasses around 7,000 young people, and it is situated in one of Lewisham's most deprived wards. On the local estate, two incidents of serious youth stabbings have been recorded in the period since the youth club closed. Government statistics show that crime in the club's catchment area rose between 2010 and 2015 despite an overall reduction in crime in the borough. I support bringing this much-needed club back into use; it should be given consideration as part of the Government-led public health approach.

In the meantime, I would like to pay tribute to the model of a mobile community youth service called XLP, which is being used in my constituency, and to Ubuntu, a third sector organisation that supports parents and young people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds in my constituency. They are both doing well at making the kind of sustained interventions in young people's lives that make a real difference, also against a backdrop of minimal resources. As we have already heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, third sector organisations such as these should not be “scrimping around” for money. The funding should be in place, because they are making a significant difference in reducing serious youth crime and empowering young people and their families. The Government could learn something from those two fantastic organisations and would do well to invest further in the third sector as well as increasing spending in local government for young people's provisions and launching a public health approach to serious youth violence.

6.11 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): This has been a fantastic and wide-ranging debate, with truly excellent contributions from both sides of the House. It has demonstrated the complexity of the factors and causes behind serious violence, and the genuine crisis that is enveloping communities across the country. We heard from the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) about the excellent public

health model that is being championed in Scotland, from which lessons are being learned across England and Wales. He also talked about the policy implications of treating violence as a disease.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who has been mentioned many times today. She is a true champion of the policy requirements relating to youth violence, and she is also the chair of the Youth Violence Commission. She made an incredibly powerful speech about the repeated patterns and characteristics of adverse childhood experiences. She gave us two “Sliding Doors” scenarios of young men growing up in vulnerable situations. One was unable to get the help he needed, but the other, who was similarly vulnerable, was able to access support structures and systems under an active, interventionist and caring approach that would prevent him from falling into violence or becoming a victim of violence himself. That reminded me of a young man in my own constituency, for whom I was desperately trying to get help. Sadly, his life was lost at the hands of another child in a similar way to that described by my hon. Friend.

The Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), spoke about her Committee’s inquiry into serious violence. Crucially, it is taking note of the voices of young people, many of whom do not have a trusted police officer attached to their school or models of neighbourhood policing that they can respond to and get to know. She spoke about the need for the scale and pace of Government action to match the scale and pace of the violence that we are seeing. We have heard from many speakers today that the Government are not showing any signs of urgency in their response to the violence that is enveloping the country. My right hon. Friend gave examples of the evidence being given to her Committee, including quotes from senior police officers who said that the Government were more interested in narrative than in action, and from Louise Casey, who described the Government’s strategy as “woefully inadequate”.

The hon. Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) drew on their personal experience in the youth service and emphasised the need for education and prevention. That has been a reassuring theme—the focus on the need for early intervention and prevention. I think that there is cross-party agreement that that is essential, in addition to a strong criminal justice response.

There has been a huge focus on the cuts to youth services. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) spoke about the cuts in her constituency and the increasing number of both children in care and exclusions. She pointed out that, although there have of course been spikes in youth violence under previous Governments, we have not had such a vulnerable cohort of young people at risk of falling into violence. There has been a sustained, year on year trend of growth in serious violence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) spoke about Gwent police’s excellent work. It is important to acknowledge the excellent initiatives in some police forces. I congratulate the Welsh Government on their “one public service” approach, their focus on adverse childhood experiences and their commitment

to developing trauma-informed public services. She made the point, as we have all done, that resources are required to make that partnership working effective.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) gave his usual impassioned speech on the subject and called on the Home Secretary—it is great that he is here today—to come to the House more often to update us on his work and the Government’s progress, to convene Cobra and to show the urgency that the House clearly demands. There are 2,000 county lines with 10,000 children involved. The Government simply do not feel the urgency that that clearly demands.

The hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) talked about 700 young victims of knife crime last year in the west midlands and the £106 million in reserves that he believes West Midlands police are sitting on. I believe that he knows that that figure is from 2017 and that the actual figure is £43 million of available reserves, which is intended to fall to £30 million simply to balance the books. His police and crime commissioner intends to use all non-essential reserves by 2020-21.

Julian Knight: The hon. Lady should understand that that related to the point at which the police and crime commissioner decided to close Solihull police station. At that point, there was £106 million in reserves.

Louise Haigh: But at that point, the police and crime commissioner already had a plan to use all available reserves purely to balance the books because of continued central Government cuts since 2010. I ask the hon. Gentleman whether he would rather see frontline officers on the beat, responding to violent crime, or police stations open. That is the invidious position that sustained central Government cuts have put police and crime commissioners in.

The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) said he was disappointed that we voted against the police funding settlement earlier this year. I am sorry to have disappointed him. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) promised him that I would explain why the precept is a fundamentally unfair way to fund police forces. West Yorkshire has double the population of Surrey and four times the level of violent crime, yet through the Government’s police funding settlement, the two can raise exactly the same amount through the precept. Through the same police funding settlement, South Yorkshire can raise 12% of the money lost since 2010, whereas Dorset can raise 32%. It is unjustifiable for money to be raised in a way that has no bearing on levels of crime or demand on the police.

Douglas Ross: I want to be absolutely clear, because I would not like someone to read the start of the debate in *Hansard* and then wonder what had happened at the end. It was not me who made that point. I think that the hon. Lady is referring to someone on the Front Bench. It was definitely not the point I was making, because we do not have PCCs in Scotland.

Louise Haigh: I think that the hon. Gentleman might have misheard me. I did not say anything about PCCs. He mentioned earlier that he was disappointed that we had voted against the settlement, and I am explaining exactly why: it is a fundamentally unfair way to fund the police and has no bearing on demand.

[*Louise Haigh*]

The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) built on her admirable campaigning work on county lines and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, talked about the excellent work of community groups in all our constituencies, but said that they were scraping by from year to year and competing for confusing and small pots of money.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) spoke about the tragic deaths of teenagers in her constituency and the fact that the police are working with at least one hand tied behind their back, lurching from one hotspot to another. The system is not as effective as it could be with sustained neighbourhood policing models in place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) built on the valuable experience of speaking to frontline officers in his constituency and spoke about them telling him how, from a very young age, they can predict which children are in danger of becoming involved in gangs, which he rightly says is a failure of the criminal justice system and, indeed, society.

My hon. Friend touched on domestic abuse, which has largely been missing from today's debate. When I visit young offender institutions meet young offenders and, one of the most consistent factors in their backgrounds is coming from a household of domestic abuse. We welcome the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, and I take this opportunity to thank all the Members who have signed my letter today calling for an investigation into domestic abuse and the family courts. If we continue to allow children to grow up in households of domestic abuse, all we are doing is creating the next generation of young offenders.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) gave a powerful perspective on behalf of communities that are over-policed, and she spoke about the consequences for those communities of failing to build trust and relationships with the police. She also spoke about looked-after children and care leavers, who are over-represented in our criminal justice system. Those contributions show the breadth of policy areas on which the public health approach undeniably has to focus.

Last month's crime statistics reveal the extent of the crisis before us today. As we have heard, never since records began have recorded incidents of violent crime been as high as they are today, yet police numbers stand at their lowest level for three decades—per population, the lowest level ever. It is important to reiterate why police numbers are important to tackling violent crime.

First, the fall in police officer numbers inevitably forces the police to refocus their resources on reactive policing. More crucially, local policing increases the legitimacy of the police, which encourages local communities to provide intelligence, report crime and work with the police proactively. That has been a massive failure of the past nine years of austerity. The cut to neighbourhood policing has seriously damaged community relations.

Policing matters—of course it does—but, as we have heard, the Government can hope to bear down on serious violence only if they bear down on the factors that lie behind it. The story of violence, and particularly

youth violence, is at its heart a question of vulnerability. Children who fall behind are now denied the speech and language therapy they desperately need. Sure Start, a lifeline for many vulnerable parents, has been cut back, and the support it used to provide has been reduced. As children grow older, they are being routinely denied the talking therapies, cognitive behavioural therapies and other psychological support that we know can reduce aggression and delinquency.

Schools, crushed under the weight of punitive funding pressures, have focused their cost-cutting on exactly the kind of targeted support needed by young people who are falling behind, including teaching assistants and special educational needs. Families are being denied intensive therapies that improve parenting skills, strengthen family cohesion and increase young people's engagement, and that are known to reduce out-of-home placements and reoffending.

Ministers come to the Dispatch Box and, regrettably, insist that the problem appeared from nowhere. We have never heard any Minister accept that a reduction in support services, a substantial cut in youth services and slashing the police to levels per head never seen before has made the blindest bit of difference. If they cannot accept their responsibility, how can we trust them to put things right?

On early intervention and prevention, what is replacing the £880 million-worth of complex provision and support for young people and the £500 million lost from Sure Start? An early intervention fund of £17 million a year and a youth endowment fund of £20 million a year. Each has been shown to be inadequate in its own way, and they are not even close to meeting the challenges faced by communities.

Some 73% of bids to the early intervention youth fund have been rejected by the Government, communities in the west midlands have been deprived of a vital project to tackle county lines exploitation, and Greater Manchester has been deprived of funding to support families against crime. In Durham, and across the country, it is the same story in violent crime hotspots. How can the Government look at this evidence and say that their efforts to tackle the problem are even close to matching the challenge?

As we have heard, the Government have launched a consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence, but it is far from clear how that will differ from or go beyond the duties already placed on agencies under crime and disorder reduction partnerships or under "Working Together to Safeguard Children" guidance. A true public health approach requires a resourced, co-ordinated, cross-Government strategy led by the Prime Minister, as we have repeatedly called for. The taskforce mentioned by the Home Secretary today, and chaired by him, has met once, and, so far no actions have been announced.

We are in a state of emergency, with the most despicable criminals exploiting the space where well-run and effective early intervention, prevention and diversion strategies once existed. The pursuit of young children by gangs is now a systematic and well-rehearsed business model, according to the Children's Commissioner. It is a national crisis that demands a sense of urgency, but that is not being felt from this Government. We cannot allow this drift. We need Ministers to step up to the plate, we need

leadership from the Prime Minister, we need resources and we need concerted, sustained action from the Government.

6.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): No young person chooses to carry a knife out of an innate desire for violence and bloodshed. Knives are carried for protection, or to belong, or because young people feel that gang membership and criminality are their only route to success and respect.

Quite rightly, we have heard from hon. Members today about the impact of adverse childhood experiences. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) gave a chilling account of the differences in life chances—what she called the sliding doors of a young man's life. She will, I am sure, welcome the fact that the Leader of the House of Commons, who is an expert in early years work—she has spent much of her life examining the first two years of life and development—is focusing a piece of work for the Government on precisely the first two years of life. That will have an important role to play in the future, when it comes to how we as a Government ensure that young people have the chances that we all hope and expect they will.

The hon. Lady will also be pleased to know that around £7 million has been awarded to the four police forces in Wales, which, in collaboration with Public Health Wales, will develop and test a new approach to policing that prevents and mitigates adverse childhood experiences. That is just one of the 61 commitments from the serious violence strategy, which has been completed, and I am sure we will all welcome the outcome of that vital work.

Hon. Members mentioned the impact of domestic abuse. As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), outlined, the Government are bringing forward a groundbreaking piece of legislation. The draft Domestic Abuse Bill is currently being scrutinised before a Joint Committee of both Houses. That is precisely because, when it comes before the House, we want it to be a good piece of legislation that meets the high expectations of everyone on both sides of the House, not just in helping survivors and children in the immediate term—I include children as survivors in that—but because we know that domestic abuse is a primary factor in making a child more susceptible to being a perpetrator or a victim of violence.

At the Prime Minister's summit only a few weeks ago, we heard from a professor from Chicago—there is an international aspect to our work as well, which I will come on to in due course—who told us that domestic violence in the home, whether in the States, in the UK or wherever, is the biggest indicator that someone will perpetrate violence, or be a victim of violence, outside the home. Of course, that makes complete sense. If someone grows up in an environment of abuse, not only does that have an impact on the way in which their brain grows and develops, but it must have an impact on how they handle themselves with the wider public and outside. Of course, it also terrifies the children who live in such households.

The reason why I am so pleased that we have been talking about adverse childhood experiences, domestic abuse and so on is that this is as much about life chances

as about the causes of criminality, drug gangs and so on. The fact is that young people growing up without life chances are just as likely to become a victim of knife crime as a perpetrator. They want a way out. They want the chance of a life without violence. We must give them a dream of a future. That was one of the strongest themes that came out of the Prime Minister's serious violence summit, and that is why the serious violence strategy places such strong emphasis on early intervention, tackling the root causes of violent crime and preventing young people from being drawn into violence in the first place.

Members understandably want to debate this issue; I hope people realise that I positively welcome opportunities to be at the Dispatch Box to discuss this incredibly important topic, but I also believe that we should be listening to young people. That is precisely why I am inviting young people with lived experience, including former gang members, into this place so that they can tell us about their experiences, what they think we should be doing and what they think will make a difference.

I thank Members for their considered, careful and thoughtful contributions. I have to say that I consider this afternoon to have been the norm for the way in which Members conduct themselves in these debates. There is an acknowledgement that Members from all parties want serious violence to stop and want to work together to help to stop it, which is why it is always a privilege for me to respond to these debates, but I want to go further: in due course I shall issue an invitation to all Members, from all parties, to a roundtable at the beginning of next month to discuss further what is happening, and not only at the national level.

This is an incredibly complex policy area—I shall give the House a list of some of the things we are doing in due course, but there is so much more to this. As colleagues from the all-party group on knife crime will know from when I have discussed this issue with them, this is not just about debates in the House; it is about us talking about what we can do and about the best practice we can share. I want to understand what Members think is working in their local areas.

Huw Merriman: The Minister will have heard from Opposition and Government Members the disappointment at the lack of attendance of this debate; when she reaches out to every single MP, will she consider whether every single MP could partner with a youth centre in or around London, so that we can work closely with those youth centres and they can work closely with us? That might bring more people into this sphere.

Victoria Atkins: That is a really great idea for which I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who did so much in his past to work with young people. It is ideas of that sort that can really help to make a difference. I remember that in a previous debate, or it might have been an urgent question, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) talked about how we, as Members of Parliament, are leaders in our local communities. We can help our local communities by understanding the resources available and the help and best practice that is out there, to really drive change in our local communities.

I think we all acknowledge that the creation of life chances for young people will require patience, hard work and commitment. It is not a quick fix. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford

[Victoria Atkins]

(Yvette Cooper), who chairs the Home Affairs Committee, rightly asked me, as part of her scrutiny of the work of Government, about the number of children at risk—the scale of the problem. My answer is that so many factors are at play—indeed, the serious violence strategy identifies 22 risk factors for children, which are balanced alongside protective factors that can mitigate those risk factors—that can determine whether a child is at risk of serious violence.

Let me give some examples of those factors. According to the Children's Commissioner, some 27,000 children have identified themselves as being members of gangs. Some 7,720 pupils were excluded in 2016-17. Members will know that excluded pupils are over-represented in the population of perpetrators and victims of serious violence. Some 86,000 children have a parent in prison. Now, we are not saying for a moment that each and every one of those children is at significant risk of being either a perpetrator or a victim of knife crime, because no one factor alone determines that. They may have hugely mitigating protective factors that draw them away from the web of violence, but this is the complexity of it. This is the detail that we in the Home Office—I am extraordinarily grateful to my officials—have spent so much time examining, not only in the past 12 months since the strategy was published, but in the months before that, when the strategy was being prepared. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) emphasised, this is urgent and it requires urgent action. That is why we have put in place not only immediate action to tackle knife crime and serious violence, but action in medium and longer-term strategies.

In the immediate term, we have established a National County Lines Coordination Centre to tackle the violent and exploitative activity associated with the county lines drugs trade. My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) noted the exponential rise in county lines and the fact that drug gangs respect no geographical borders. That point was also emphasised by the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who again referenced adverse childhood experiences.

My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who tirelessly campaigns for a police station in his metropolitan borough, also set out the complex policing challenges that living next to a major metropolitan city can and does have for his local police force.

Let me go back to the County Lines Coordination Centre and give Members an idea of the scale of the problem.

Julian Knight: Will my hon. Friend join me in calling on the Labour police and crime commissioner to retain Solihull police station in the light of the fact that he has recently saved the police station in Sutton Coldfield, another Conservative seat? By the way, the only two police stations that were set to close were in two Conservative seats in the west midlands.

Victoria Atkins: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will resist the temptation to comment about the police station. He will know that the Home Secretary meets the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner not just of the west midlands but of all the police forces, and I am sure that that message has been heard loud and clear. We do return to the fact that, of course, such

decisions are a matter for the police and crime commissioner. We are often keen to make the point that the reason we have police and crime commissioners is that they are answerable to the local population that they serve.

In the few months that the National County Lines Coordination Centre has been in operation, it has already seen more than 1,000 arrests and more than 1,300 vulnerable people safeguarded. That shows not only the complexity of the problem, but the scale of it. It is one reason why we have introduced the Offensive Weapons Bill, which, I hope, will receive Royal Assent tomorrow.

Vernon Coaker *rose—*

Victoria Atkins: If I may just continue.

The Bill strengthens the legislation on guns, knives and corrosive substances. In addition, we have brought forward amendments to that Bill to introduce knife crime prevention orders to reach those children most at risk. I came in for a little bit of criticism, it is fair to say, from Opposition Members that these were put into the Bill without enough scrutiny. The point is that we were acting urgently in response to the police who had asked us for these orders. They said, "Please give them to us. Let's pilot them and see what happens with them." To my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), I say that the pilot will start in London in the autumn. We will ensure that we have good guidance for these new powers, and we very much wish the police well in using them.

Vernon Coaker: I am sorry that I am slightly interrupting the flow of the Minister's speech, which is why I tried to intervene at a particular point a minute ago, but I thank her for the courtesy of giving way.

On national priorities and national agencies to tackle crime, what will she and the Home Secretary say to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about Lynne Owens's demand yesterday for £2.7 billion of extra money? This is very serious, and the Minister must not prevaricate. That is the head of the National Crime Agency saying that £2.7 billion is needed. If the Minister were to say from that Dispatch Box that that is what she and the Home Secretary will ask the Chancellor for, she would find the rest of Parliament supporting her.

Victoria Atkins: Of course, we take that very, very seriously. The hon. Gentleman will know, with his experience as a Minister, that the Home Secretary meets not just the director of the NCA, but other very senior police and law enforcement officers regularly. This is very much part of an ongoing discussion. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has already ensured that we have extra funding for the police and for serious organised crime. There is, of course, the spending review coming up, and the message is heard and understood. The hon. Gentleman did challenge the Home Secretary and—I think—me to bang the table a bit. I do not want to put words—or actions, as it were—into the Home Secretary's mouth, but it is fair to say that he listened to the concerns of chief constables and police and crime commissioners, and made an impassioned case to the Chancellor, to which the Chancellor listened very carefully. In his spring statement, the Chancellor provided an extra £100 million to deal specifically with serious violence, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Gedling will be pleased that more than £1.5 million of that is going to Nottinghamshire police.

Reacting to feedback from the police, we have announced changes to section 60 stop-and-search powers to make it simpler for officers in seven force areas to use the powers in anticipation of serious violence. Hon. Members will also be aware of the ongoing Operation Sceptre events that take place across all forces at particular times of the year and have so much impact.

There has rightly been a focus on early intervention, so I will run through just some of the successes and mention the range of young people we are reaching through our efforts. The #knifefree media advertising has reached around 6 million young people each time we have refreshed it, and there have been millions of views of the campaign videos. In the latest iteration, about half a million people have visited the knifefree.co.uk website since 8 April. I encourage hon. Members to spread the word about #knifefree and the website.

Our £22 million early intervention youth fund is already supporting 29 projects endorsed by police and crime commissioners across England and Wales. At least 60,000 children and young people will be reached by this fund by the end of March 2020. Through our anti-knife crime community fund, we have supported 68 local grassroots community projects across England and Wales, reaching at least 50,000 young people in 2018-19. We are also supporting targeted interventions for intensive one-to-one support for people already involved in serious violence or county lines-related exploitation, through the St Giles Trust, Redthread and our young people's advocates. We have already supported more than 800 young people in 2018-19 through these specific and targeted interventions, and that support continues. I have not even mentioned the £920 million troubled families programme, or the many various Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport schemes, including the Premier League Kicks programme, the success of which has been described by my hon. Friends the Members for Moray and for Solihull.

I will finish this part of my speech by saying an enormous thank you to everyone who works with young people to help tackle and prevent serious violence.

I will now quickly run through the medium and long-term measures we are taking. In the medium term, £35 million of the £100 million announced in the spring statement will be used to help establish violence reduction units in the seven forces that account for more than half of knife crime across the country. Officials are working with the people who will be involved in those discussions, and we will share those proposals as soon as we can next month. However, real progress will require a step change in the way in which all public authorities work together, which is why a multi-agency approach is fundamental to supporting the battle against violent crime.

The Prime Minister's summit, to which we invited young people, bereaved families of victims, professionals, academics, faith leaders and businesspeople—pretty much anyone we could think of whom we could include in our efforts—has already made an impact, and will have a real effect from the centre of Government. It is essential that the Prime Minister is showing such leadership on the issue because all these efforts are being co-ordinated across all areas of Government.

At a local level, this is about partners working together, which is why we are consulting on a new legal duty to underpin a multi-agency approach. The consultation

closes on 28 May, so I urge anyone who is interested to respond to it. We have also announced an independent review of drugs. There was surprisingly little discussion about the drugs market in this debate, but we know that it is one of the major drivers of serious violence, which is why the Home Secretary has commissioned Professor Dame Carol Black to conduct a review of drug use in the 21st century.

Jeff Smith: On the subject of drugs, may I just make a suggestion? If we were to legalise and regulate the cannabis trade, we could raise £1 billion a year to put into policing crime. We could also make the product safer and take the trade out of the hands of organised criminal gangs. By regulating our cannabis trade in the way we do with alcohol, we would make our streets safer.

Victoria Atkins: As the hon. Gentleman will know, regulation and decriminalisation are not in the review.

In the long term, it is only by offering stability and opportunity in young people's lives that we can hope to tackle serious violence. Last year, the Home Secretary announced the 10-year, £200 million youth endowment fund. The fund is to be locked in for the next 10 years and invested to leverage up that investment. It is going to fund interventions and projects, evaluate what works, and act as a centre of expertise.

In conclusion—

Joan Ryan: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I must continue because I am conscious of the courtesies to the House, unless you are happy for me to give way, Madam Deputy Speaker. You are, so I will.

Joan Ryan: First, I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet Yvonne Lawson of the Godwin Lawson Foundation from my constituency, who lost her young teenage son to knife crime two years ago.

Nearly all hon. Members have talked about partnership working and great little projects on the ground, but all of us have also said that local authorities, which are the drivers at local level, are absolutely struggling because of the lack of resources. Does the Minister accept that local authorities' ability to push forward partnership working is severely handicapped by the continuing lack of resources and ongoing cuts?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. Lady. I am always very happy, of course, to meet those who have lost loved ones, as her constituents have, particularly those who are extraordinary in being able to found charities to help tackle serious violence.

The point of the violence reduction units is that they are bringing all the partner agencies together. As I say, we are investing £35 million from the £100 million available. I should add that that £35 million will be invested in VRUs and police forces that are most affected by violent crime—between 10 and 20 forces nationally. The details are being finalised. This partnership working will enable local authorities to play their part, in addition to the increased funding they are getting, as announced by my colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

[Victoria Atkins]

Criminals are buying children's lives, and their misery, for the cheapest of prices. It is sometimes a new pair of trainers or a few pounds a week—and of course that is before the drug debts are called in. We have to offer them more. That is why, following the Prime Minister's summit, I will be working with businesses to create opportunities for young people to provide them with a route away from violent crime.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford set out, no young person should grow up without hope, prospects or opportunities. There is an alternative to a life of violence. If we work together, we can offer young people a chance to make something more of their lives and stop the senseless killing. We can—and, if we all work together, we will—offer them a dream of a future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of serious violence.

Business without Debate

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 5 to 9 together.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (CUSTOMS)

That the Customs (Records) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 113), dated 29 January 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 31 January, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (VALUE ADDED TAX)

That the Value Added Tax (Place of Supply of Services) (Supplies of Electronic Communications and Broadcasting Services) (Amendment and Revocation) (EU Exit) Order 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 404), dated 28 February 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 March, be approved.

That the Finance Act 2011, Schedule 23 (Data-gathering Powers) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 397), dated 28 February 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 March, be approved.

CRIMINAL INJURIES COMPENSATION

That the draft Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme 2012 (Amendment) Instrument 2019, which was laid before this House on 28 March, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (PUBLIC PASSENGER TRANSPORT)

That the draft International Road Passenger Transport (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 3 April, be approved.—(*Mike Freer.*)

Question agreed to.

Alexandra Hospital, Redditch

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

6.49 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am glad to be able to raise in the Chamber the issue of services at the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch. I hear concerns time and again in public meetings, and I thank the local groups, such as Save the Alex, that are campaigning on this matter.

In short, services at the Alex are inadequate. That is not my word, but the one used by the independent Care Quality Commission. It inspected Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which includes the Alex Hospital in Redditch, in June last year and again found it to be inadequate. That represents no change since the last inspection. Indeed, in 16 areas that the CQC inspects, only one was rated good, none was outstanding, and half were rated inadequate, with the remaining requiring improvement. That is not good enough.

On being elected in 2017, I inherited a situation where the trust had already approved a new clinical model for future acute services to which centralisation was key. As a result, regrettably, a number of services, including maternity and paediatric care, were removed from the Alex and relocated to Worcestershire Royal Hospital. Our maternity unit closed in November 2015, and paediatrics was “temporarily” transferred in September 2016. The new plan, which was rubber-stamped in 2017, is intended to relieve pressure on both hospitals, improve patient safety and address staff shortages, but almost two years on from the removal of services and the approval of the new plan, it is clear to me that it has not had the intended outcome. The hospital is still inadequate, and the trust remains in special measures. Some services have got worse. Patients cannot access services when they need them, waiting times are poor and promised investments are not coming to fruition quickly enough. Pressure has not been relieved. Patient safety is being called into question, and staff shortages persist at both sites.

Since my election, I have given NHS bosses and management time to demonstrate to me and my constituents that the new clinical model is beneficial. I have done my best to explain to constituents why services were transferred, and I have visited the hospital time and again—along with my fellow Worcestershire MPs, who are here tonight—to keep a close eye on developments.

We have thousands of dedicated and fantastic staff in our hospital. I have spoken to many of them, and my constituents report time and again that the care they receive is fantastic. I thank every single member of staff at the hospital for their work. However, I do not believe I can continue in good faith to defend the new clinical model. It is not delivering for the people of Redditch. I secured this debate to press my constituents' concerns on the Minister and call for a fresh approach. All options must remain on the table.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; I spoke to her beforehand and explained the situation of some of my hospitals back home. I commend her efforts to retain services at the Alexandra Hospital. The recommendations of Redditch Borough Council health commission, which came out

firmly against the clinical commissioning group proposals, must be given weight. The proposals must not progress to any lessening of services in the Alexandra. My own Ulster hospital is seeing proposals to redirect stroke services to a hospital that is over an hour away in traffic, which will certainly mean that damage cannot be fixed within the window of opportunity for recovery. Does she agree that money saving cannot trump life saving in any trust area?

Rachel Maclean: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It sounds as though his experiences are very similar to ours in Worcestershire. I am sure he will continue to stand up for his constituents.

I have campaigned for improvements to local health services, and I welcome the investments coming on stream as a result. Upgrades in endoscopy, a new urgent care centre at the Alex and better infrastructure have all come on stream. A frailty unit has been transferred from Worcester, and a new ward has opened to improve the flow of patients in and out of A&E. Those are all making a difference.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I echo my hon. Friend's sentiment about the hard work of the stalwart staff of the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust. I can testify that, right now, my 11-year-old son is sitting in the A&E department having a sprained ankle attended to by nurses. I am sure he will be fine; he has obviously been hooning around when he should have been paying attention at school—I will talk to him when I get home.

One of the hospitals run by the trust that is not talked about much is Kidderminster treatment centre. Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to think coherently about all the services across the three hospitals? If we bring more services back to Redditch, we can also bring more long-term treatment services back to Kidderminster Hospital and have a much better service for all our constituents in Worcestershire.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my Worcestershire colleague for his intervention. I think we are all on the same page. We all want to see better services across the whole of our county of Worcestershire.

Where I am going with this debate and the point I want to make is that the long-promised plan for the Alex to become a centre of excellence for planned surgery has not materialised, despite my pressing for it constantly and despite a £29.6 million funding pot. That funding is in the process of being delivered across the trust, and it was intended to help implement the new clinical model.

That is why I believe it is time to look again at where and how services are provided, and particularly to consider the return of a range of maternity and paediatric services to the Alex. We need to explore options for the local population to use services in Birmingham, which are more accessible than those in Worcester. We also need to continue investment in our communities and build a medical school in Worcester to create our own local NHS workforce, which would help to address the shortage of staff at the root.

The context has changed because the Prime Minister recently announced the Government's intention to provide the NHS with an additional £20.5 billion by 2023-24—the

largest, longest funding settlement in the history of the NHS. We hear that the four CCGs that cover our two counties could merge into one in the future. This is why I believe it is time to be honest with people and for bosses to say that plan A is not working.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is an excellent champion for her constituents on this and many other issues. On the funding point, does she agree with me that those of us in Worcestershire are arguing not for special treatment, but for fair treatment? Particularly when it comes to funding, because we all know we are relatively underfunded at CCG level and elsewhere, we just want our fair share, not special treatment. We would just like a fair share of the cash, please. We know it is coming, and we would like our share of it.

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend echoes my point. I absolutely agree. We know the NHS is world class and we know that more funding is coming on stream; we are just arguing for it to be distributed for our constituents' benefit.

We need to act soon. Redditch is home to 85,000 people; the population has grown from 78,000 in 2001, and almost 90,000 people are expected to live locally by 2030. In neighbouring South Worcestershire, tens of thousands of new homes are planned and the population is going to grow rapidly. Redditch is a new town, and it has always attracted young families to move there and build a better life, away from the back streets of Birmingham and from all over the country. We are proud of our local environment and of much else, but I want to be able to promote the holistic experience of living in Redditch, and to say that this is a great place for people to come to and live, work, set up a business and raise their family. For that, we need to have all the facilities that young families expect, including excellent healthcare services. This is part of our campaign to unlock Redditch. It needs to be the best place in the midlands, and we deserve nothing less.

We were told that the reason for centralising maternity services away from Redditch is that the size of the population is not large enough to sustain a full maternity service safely, but that does not make sense to me and my constituents. I accept that safety has to be paramount and I know that the Meadow birth centre in Worcester does a brilliant job, but the truth is that we have a high proportion of young families, which is increasing the demand for maternity and children's services. What the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said is the same for us: it can take over an hour to reach Worcester from some areas of the town, particularly in traffic. There is no direct bus or train link from Redditch, so my constituents who need to use public transport must travel to the hospital via Birmingham or Bromsgrove.

When we look around the other areas of the west midlands conurbation, we can see that there are maternity units with populations much smaller than Redditch's: for example, in Oswestry, which has a population of 16,000; Bridgnorth, with 12,000; Burton-on-Trent, with 75,000; Hereford, with 63,000; and even Ludlow, with 11,000. I am calling on the CCG and the trust to publish those comparator statistics and justify why those towns should have their own maternity unit, but Redditch should not. Most people would understand that a higher risk birth would require more specialist

[Rachel Maclean]

services and that might not be possible in Redditch, but the vast majority of births can be catered for safely in a midwife-led maternity unit.

The centralisation has piled pressure on to Worcester. It cannot withstand that pressure and we have all voiced concerns in this Chamber. I talked about the ambulance handover delays at the Worcestershire Royal just before Christmas—they are amongst the worst in the country, with ambulances waiting for over an hour. I am very grateful that the Secretary of State visited Worcestershire Acute. He saw for himself—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Rachel Maclean: As I was saying, the Secretary of State visited Worcestershire Acute and saw the size of the emergency department, which constrains patient flow. Despite the incredible efforts of the staff triage and consultants, and even with the welcome recent investments and improvements, it is difficult to see how those problems can be solved in the short term. Surely, the answer is to let Redditch take some of the strain, particularly with paediatrics.

I appreciate that changes such as this will take time and involve many layers of management, but it is my job to ensure that the people who are making these decisions take into account the experience of my constituents. We are lucky to live in a country with free healthcare, free at the point of use. Investment in health pays off multiple times in both financial and wellbeing terms. Other trusts in the country have managed to recover from poor performance, but we in Worcestershire seem to be struggling on with one of the worst trusts in the country, and it is my constituents who pay the price. I am extremely frustrated that we are no closer to the green shoots of improvement than when I was elected, and there has been a high turnover of people in senior positions, which does not help.

I think that a practical solution to relieve pressure on the overloaded site at Worcester is to provide more care for children and families at Redditch, so I would really like to hear from the Minister what other plans there are to turn this around. What evidence does she have that improvements will take place under the current structure? How long are we expected to wait? What options are there for working more closely with the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, for example—a high-performing trust, which is rated “good” by the Care Quality Commission, with much better transport and strong historical links to Redditch?

I thank the Minister for coming here to reply to the debate. I very much look forward to hearing her response.

7.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): I really thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for the passionate, articulate pitch she made on behalf of her constituents and the health services that they deserve, because obviously we all deserve good-quality health services. As the Minister responsible, it is my job

to give challenge to ensure that we are delivering the best services we can. Obviously, they are not always as good as we would like them to be, but I can reassure my hon. Friend of my determination to make sure that we continue with the constant campaign for improvements, and for the best possible services. All our constituents, as taxpayers, are paying for those services, and they all deserve an equivalent service.

I thank my other hon. Friends from Worcestershire—my hon. Friends the Members for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) and for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—for showing their support. The issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch raises are clearly of concern across the wider area. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) has also lobbied me about this, notwithstanding the wider interests that he has in this place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch raised several important points and areas of concern, which I will seek to address. She raised a number of points about maternity services. She is absolutely right that we must ensure that we have the safest possible environment in which people have their children. Obviously, having safer births is very much a national priority, so that issue is of particular concern to me. As my hon. Friend is aware, the decision to move maternity and children’s services from the Princess Alexandra Hospital to the Worcestershire Royal was implemented in 2017, and it was clearly controversial—many changes are, and this is no exception. That is why we need to continue to give appropriate scrutiny—my hon. Friend is absolutely right to do that—to ensure that we are serving all our constituents as well as we possibly can. She is also right to say that challenges remain. The trust continues to be scrutinised closely by the Care Quality Commission and in this House.

My hon. Friend asks how long we have to wait. Quite often, changes can be achieved very quickly. Sometimes, however, whether cultural or behavioural changes, they take much longer than any of us are happy with. I say to her that in my experience, constant scrutiny by the CQC does deliver results. I encourage her to continue her discussions with local interest groups and the CQC to ensure that all the constant scrutiny and challenge drives improvement. I do not know how many times I have said it in this place, but sunlight is the best disinfectant. Accountability will drive improvement and change.

All that said, we should recognise that there has been some important progress in the service at the trust. The CQC looked at the maternity in-patient survey for February 2017, which found that the Worcestershire Royal rated well against other maternity services in all aspects of care and scored among the best in the country in partner engagement and involvement in the appropriate length of stay in hospital. In addition, following the reconfiguration of services the neonatal rota is now fully staffed and recruitment is going in the right direction; the maternity doctors’ rota is fully staffed; and the trust has avoided a lot of the cancellation of antenatal or gynaecology clinics that was previously seen. I know that people will be concerned because of the historical record, but the scrutiny of the CQC shows that there are improvements.

According to the most recent CQC report, maternity and gynaecology services at the Alex are rated “good” for caring and “responsive” and “requires improvement”

for other domains. Worcestershire Royal is rated “requires improvement” for safety and “good” in all other categories. The CQC recognised that the Worcestershire Royal’s maternity service was especially caring and responsive to parents who had suffered a pregnancy loss, such as miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death, and was committed to continually improving the care and services it provided for bereaved parents. That shows that there are some areas where the leadership are making an impact, but we clearly need to keep the situation under review.

In October 2018, the trust’s professional development team won the workforce team of the year award at the prestigious *Nursing Times* awards, which celebrate excellence in supporting the nursing and midwifery workforce. We congratulate them on that award. We should not be complacent, however. There is still very much more to do. I look forward to further discussions with my hon. Friend in the light of further investigations. We will do our best to support the entire community by making sure that performance is improved.

My hon. Friend raised the wider challenges facing the trust. It has been in special measures since December 2015. The latest CQC inspection judged the hospital as inadequate, with key concerns in urgent and emergency care, surgery and outpatients. I say again that scrutiny is the first catalyst to achieving improvement. It is worth noting that the trust achieved a “good” rating for the caring inspection domain in the latest CQC report, so in terms of patient experience there is clearly some improvement. However, nobody should be complacent about the scale of the task. As she says, her constituents really should not be expected to wait an undue length of time to achieve the quality of service that patients in other parts of the country receive.

I assure my hon. Friend that both the Government and national NHS bodies are committed to providing both the support and investment needed to help the trust make progress. I will be ensuring that we use our levers at a national level to give that appropriate challenge and support. Support currently in place for the trust includes a support package focusing on culture, risk and governance. That is very important. We always find, when a trust is going through the journey from requiring improvement to good, that leadership is crucial. I cannot overstate the importance of making sure that we are getting the right leaders in and mentoring them to deliver that. That support is crucial.

There is a quality improvement director, and there is a nurse retention collaborative programme to reduce turnover. There is a suggestion that that is starting to bear fruit. There will be emergency care support from the emergency care intensive support team and a peer support buddying arrangement with the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust. We have seen such buddying arrangements achieve real change, more than anything else by giving local leaders the confidence to be innovative and imaginative and really give additional challenge.

Local commissioners are closely involved in working with the trust to ensure that the quality of children’s and maternity services improves. Given the concerns my hon. Friend has expressed, I encourage her to engage with local commissioners to discuss how they are interpreting reviews of monthly divisional data and what they are doing to assure themselves of the quality of service. As a Minister, I can stand at the Dispatch Box and make promises, but ultimately I rely on local

commissioners to do their bit to give challenge too. In giving me challenge, I encourage her also to give them challenge and have those discussions. The spirit of co-operation across the whole system is there to achieve improvements.

My hon. Friend rightly made her pitch for her constituents’ share of the increased funding for the NHS. While improvement is about more than just money, investment is clearly part of the picture. We will make the appropriate investments to support the trust. Recent examples of investments we have made are an award of £3.96 million for a breast imaging improvement plan, which will improve breast screening at the Alex; the development of a maternity hub to serve the Redditch area; and £3 million for a link bridge between the main hospital building and an outer building to be in place for the winter to assist with winter pressures.

I am confident that this will not be the last discussion my hon. Friend and I have about her local health services. I am grateful to her for bringing her concerns to me and putting them on the record. As I say, sunlight is the best disinfectant when it comes to inspection and challenge on the ground, but the opportunity to raise things here on the Floor of the House gives a signal to the entire health system that where we think things are not good enough and need to improve, we will not be shy in our determination to achieve that improvement.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for her comments and share her view that sunlight is a great disinfectant. May I press her? We have been undergoing this journey for four years, which is a long time. I had not been a Member of Parliament before and have never seen a trust turn around, so I would be grateful for some indication of how long she thinks it is reasonable for us to wait, with me as the local MP explaining to people, “You have to keep waiting.” Has she any examples of how it can happen and at what pace?

Jackie Doyle-Price: I will answer my hon. Friend’s question, but I will answer a different one too. She asks how long it is reasonable to wait. It is not reasonable to have to wait at all, because we should be delivering services of an appropriate quality. How long will people have to wait? We should be entirely honest when an institution requires improvement. She is right that four years seems like a long time. When my local trust went into special measures, it came out within two years, and the crucial ingredient was getting the right leader in at the top. Other trusts wait longer because other challenges can come into play that mean they are judged to require improvement—some trusts still struggle to get the right personnel, for example. We need to look in detail at exactly where the weaknesses are. My challenge to the system is to come up with a good plan to help get out of it. I would expect the buddying system with the Wolverhampton trust to start to deliver that more effectively, because there is no better driver of speed than external challenge.

With that in mind, I would like to close this excellent debate. The points made here should be considered very seriously by the local health system.

Question put and agreed to.

7.14 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (SANCTIONS)

That the Russia (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 855), dated 10 April 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 11 April, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 184.

Division No. 416]

AYES

Afolami, Bim
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Austin, Ian
 Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, rh Stephen
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, rh Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berger, Luciana (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Chris Leslie*)
 Berry, Jake
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Braverman, Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Burns, Conor
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, Colin
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clarke, Mr Simon
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Creasy, Stella
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Philip

Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dodds, rh Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Ms Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, rh Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Field, rh Mark
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Gapes, Mike
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Hair, Kirstene
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark

Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hermon, Lady
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, rh Mr Nick
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lancaster, rh Mark
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Leslie, Mr Chris
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lopez, Julia
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Moore, Damien
 Moran, Layla

Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Alok
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe (*Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill*)
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, rh Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Streeter, Wes
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swinson, Jo

Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa

Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Woodcock, John

Harris, Carolyn
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Jones, Susan
 Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Khan, Afzal
 Killen, Ged
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Lee, Karen
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lloyd, Tony
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian
 C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Nandy, Lisa
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi

Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rashid, Faisal
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Shah, Naz
 Sherriff, Paula
 Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast
 by Vicky Foxcroft*)
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Stevens, Jo
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Watson, Tom
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Williamson, Chris
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Champion, Sarah
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Coaker, Vernon
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Creagh, Mary
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Nic

David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 De Cordova, Marsha
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dent Coad, Emma
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Efford, Clive
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 15 May 2019

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

Marriage and Civil Partnership: Minimum Age

9.30 am

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank our new Minister for replying to this important debate and look forward to his response. The debate is about whether the House should consider increasing the legal age of marriage and civil partnership in the UK to 18.

Whatever our differences, I confidently predict that everyone in the House believes that it is sacrosanct that we protect our children; indeed, I suspect that all agree that we should be at the forefront of protecting children across the world. Laws in this country rightly consider young people differently until they are 18, and in the wider world the United Nations convention on the rights of the child relates to those under that age. It is clear that 16-year-olds are not adults. Some may outwardly appear more mature, but the reality is that they are still developing in both body and mind. In their teens, boys and girls are still guided by parents and teachers; after all, it was us who insisted that they need to be in full-time education until they are 18.

Could Members possibly imagine the 16-year-olds they know—their own children or grandchildren—getting married at that age? My granddaughter will be 15 later this year, and the idea of her getting married in just over a year's time is mind-boggling, and she would agree. She will not be forced into marriage, but sadly that is not true of all young people, either in the UK or, just as importantly, across the globe, and specifically in countries where this country, and indeed this House, still hold significant sway.

The ability to marry under the age of 18 with the consent of parents is an important legal anomaly; I would argue that it is an absurdity. The reality of child marriage is extremely complex and wide-reaching.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a strong point. Has she looked at minimum ages around the world? There seems to be quite a large variation, particularly in places such as Africa, where it can be as low as 13 in some countries. Has she looked at comparative ages in the rest of Europe?

Mrs Latham: I have not actually looked at comparative ages in the rest of Europe. However, certainly in Africa and other developing countries, there is a wide range. We ask African countries and anywhere that we send development money to not to allow children to marry, and to set the minimum age at 18. They turn to us and ask why they should listen, because we allow children to marry. That is another very good reason why we should increase the age to 18.

The problem cuts across religions, regions and cultures, and it happens at home in the UK too, in the 21st century. The fact that it is possible to marry at 16 effectively means that child marriage is written into British law, which is held up as a guiding light in legal systems across the world. By not changing it, we give regimes an excuse to say, "What's good for the British is good for us."

I previously advocated changing our marriage law to increase the legal age to 18—with no exceptions—through a ten-minute rule Bill. Unfortunately, I had to withdraw it on Second Reading. Among the arguments I made in the House in support of the Bill were those relating to maturity levels, negative social implications, meeting international standards and helping to prevent forced marriages. I will reiterate all those arguments in more detail in this speech, to stress the importance of increasing the legal age of marriage in the UK.

Statistics on marriage among 16 and 17-year-olds are limited, but a limited dataset can be found on the Office for National Statistics website. It shows that 40 boys and 200 girls aged 16 to 17 married an opposite-sex partner in 2014, which is the most recent period for which we have data. Same-sex partners can now also marry at 16, but there is no recorded data on same-sex couples getting married at 16 or 17, which might be because there are so few cases, or none at all, of same-sex couples marrying below 18. The numbers might be relatively low, but the negative impact on the individuals involved in the marriage are large and wide-ranging.

Hon. Members should keep in mind the wider influence that our laws have. Increasing the marriage age in the UK to 18 has been gathering political momentum for some time. It should be noted that in 2017 Parliament considered the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill, which sought to raise the minimum age of consent to marriage or civil partnership to 18 and create an offence of causing a person under 18 to enter into a marriage or civil partnership. Unfortunately, the 2016-17 Session was prorogued and the Bill made no further progress. I attempted to reignite the process with my ten-minute rule Bill, but this failed on Second Reading.

Frustratingly, previous efforts to amend the existing law have been rejected or delayed for a number of reasons. One argument is that the number of people who get married under 18 is so low—and ever decreasing—that it is not worth the legislative time to change the law. However, for those who get married at such a young age, the social impact is enormous, and as we have not legislated for more than a month, we could have fitted it in. The reality is that the largest body of people that this change in the law will protect are not foolish, love-struck teens but vulnerable young women forced into marriages permitted by their own families for a host of social and cultural reasons.

As a nation, we have a moral duty to do everything in our power to reduce the number of forced marriages and close loopholes that make it possible to obtain such marriages by legal means. This relatively simple and straightforward change to the existing law would have a significant impact on young people. Marriage is a major life decision for which children are not emotionally or physically ready. Marriage is intended to be a lifetime commitment and should not be rushed into. Setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 provides an objective, rather than subjective, standard of maturity, which safeguards a child from being married when they are not ready.

[Mrs Latham]

I passionately believe that it should be our priority to protect children, and that may mean from themselves as well as from potential dangers from others. The very fact that children of 16 and 17 need the consent of their parents to be married shows that they are not mature enough to make the decisions themselves—they are children. Increasing the age to 18 ensures that teenagers do not recklessly and naively rush into marriage, but it also protects them from the demands of parents who try to push their offspring to marry early. I say this as somebody who believes in marriage; I am not trying to stop marriage, just for those who are too young. In both cases, child marriages suffer from complications that too often end in divorce.

This year marks 101 years of the suffragette movement. We should recall that it was pressure from those brave campaigners that brought about the Age of Marriage Act 1929. Until then there was no defined minimum age, and making it 16 was seen as protecting children. However, 90 years ago, most young people aged 16 would have been working, probably since they were 14, unlike now, in England, where they must stay in either full-time education or training. My own mother started work at 14, so it would not have been unreasonable for her to get married at 16. She did not; she waited until she was 19, which in my view is still too young. However, life has changed. In other words, that was then and this is now, and we need to move with the times. Culture has changed, and so has our commitment to protecting young people—or at least it should have done.

There are a number of negative consequences from marrying at 16 or 17. Research has shown that child marriage is often associated with leaving education early, limited career and vocational opportunities, serious physical and mental health problems, developmental difficulties for the children born to young mothers, and an increased risk of domestic violence. A clear example of that is that if married children drop out of school and fail to finish education and training, they can subsequently be locked into poverty. It is clear that that phenomenon disproportionately affects girls. Child brides in particular are often isolated, with limited opportunities to participate in the development of their wider communities and reach their full potential in modern society. It is difficult for child brides to pursue education, employment or entrepreneurial opportunities. Child marriage therefore hampers efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development goals. It leaves young brides at risk of premature school drop-out, sexual activity—often without consent or contraception—and the myriad health-related consequences that accompany teenage pregnancy.

The Campaign for Female Education notes that teenage birth rates are highest where child marriage is most prevalent. When girls become pregnant before their bodies are ready, they are at high risk of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, which endanger the life of both mother and child. Human Rights Watch noted that girls who marry are at higher risk of domestic violence than women who marry as adults. The Campaign for Female Education supports that assertion.

It is interesting to note that, in general, fewer people are getting married at a young age. For marriages of opposite-sex couples, the average age for men marrying

in 2015 was 37.5 years and for women it was 35.1 years. People are less likely to settle down quickly when they are young.

There is a far greater focus on education for both men and women now. Quite rightly, ambition and expectation are higher for many young people in the modern day and age. The late teens and early twenties are seen as key development years to study, travel and consider options for the world of work. Historically, women may have got married younger, but in the modern world their education and employment prospects are far greater. Some 37.1% of young women go to university, which did not happen in previous years.

The Campaign for Female Education states that women who are employed reinvest 90% of their earnings in their families, lifting themselves, their children, their siblings and relatives out of poverty. However, when a girl is married as a child, that can often mean the end of her education and impede her ability to become financially independent. The campaign concludes:

“One girl’s potential to lift an entire family, and even a community, out of poverty disappears. This is happening millions of times over. As the inter-generational cycle of poverty continues, youth unemployment and economic instability can lead to migration, conflict and violence.”

Every child bride could have been a doctor, teacher, scientist, entrepreneur or politician even. There is a huge social as well as economic cost to child marriage.

British law should act as a gold standard internationally and reverberate around the world. That should be the case with child marriage. We should be using our influence with other countries to end child marriage. Unfortunately, the UK is out of sync with other western countries and ignores the advice of the international human rights conventions on this issue. The international human rights conventions on women’s rights and on children say that countries should end the practice of enabling child marriage below 18. The UK is violating those commitments. Under the UN sustainable development goals, countries around the world have pledged to end child marriage—any marriage in which one or both spouses are under 18—and we have promised to do that by 2030. Human Rights Watch has asserted that the EU could do more to help to end child marriage, and I understand that the European Parliament is working towards that.

Many countries’ legal systems prevent marriage before the age of 18. I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) that I had not researched the position in Europe, but I have looked at Sweden, the Netherlands and Spain, because they recently reformed their laws on child marriage, as did the US state of Virginia. Similar laws are pending in other US states, but not in this country yet. Other countries permit marriage among the young only for certain groups. For instance, according to the US State Department’s human rights report on Trinidad and Tobago from 2014, the official marriage age is 18 for men and women, but Muslims and Hindus have a separate Marriage Act.

International law is very specific about who should be allowed to marry. If a country wants to permit exceptions to the minimum age of 18, “mature, capable” children are allowed to marry, but only “in exceptional circumstances” at age 16 or older, when

“such decisions are made by a judge based on legitimate exceptional grounds defined by law”

and

“without deference to culture and tradition.”

By allowing 16-year-olds to marry without consent from a judge, the UK is in reality breaking international law. However, the great hypocrisy here is that we ask other countries, in the developing world, to abide by international law and ensure that the legal age of marriage is 18. I believe it is vital that the UK live by the standards that it is keen to advocate for in the developing world.

Following the first Girl Summit in 2014, the Department for International Development allocated up to £39 million over five years to support global efforts to prevent child marriages. There is a vast body of work to do, as globally 15 million girls under 18 are married each year. By its proactive contribution, the UK recognised that child marriages result in early pregnancy and girls facing social isolation, interrupted schooling, limited career and vocational opportunities and an increased risk of domestic violence, so why are we not leading the way by increasing the legal age of marriage in this country?

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): If I get the opportunity, I hope to catch your eye, Mr Bailey, and raise a couple of points, but in the interim, let me ask this. My hon. Friend has referred yet again to teenage pregnancy. Can she clarify whether she is seeking to change both the legal age of marriage and the age of sexual consent, or just the legal age of marriage?

Mrs Latham: With my Bill, if I can bring it back after the next Queen's Speech, I would be looking to change only the age of marriage. I do not think the House would accept changing the legal age at which sex can take place and I think it would be very difficult to stop that—to change that law. Although it might be desirable, I think it would be impossible—just think of all the young people in this country, with hormones racing round their bodies—to stop sex happening. It has happened throughout the ages, and I think that a measure to try to stop it in this day and age would not get through the House. What I want to do is to change the age of marriage, and perhaps that will have some influence in terms of people deciding to keep themselves pure until they get married. That is a hope I have, but I do not know whether it is a reality.

Why are we not leading the way by increasing the legal age of marriage in this country from 16 to 18, which is the recognised age of adulthood? In Bangladesh, which has the second highest absolute number of child marriages in the world—just under 4 million—some lobbyists are said to be using the current UK law as an example of why the legal age of marriage there should be lowered. They are saying, “You allow children to get married. Why shouldn't we? Why should we listen to you?”

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I have had exactly that experience in Bangladesh. I met the Prime Minister and spoke to her about a law that the country was trying to pass to make marriage legal under 18 in certain circumstances, and she threw back to me, “In your country, you are allowed to marry at 16.” The message was really “Do not come here lecturing us,” so I want to echo the point that the hon. Lady made very well just now.

Mrs Latham: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. We cannot tell people what to do if we are not doing it ourselves. We have to lead by example, and the change

that I propose is one way in which we can do that. We need the three relevant Departments in the UK: DFID; the Ministry of Justice; and the Department for Work and Pensions—no. Which Department is the Minister from?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): Does my hon. Friend mean the Home Office?

Mrs Latham: The Home Office—yes, that is it. I thank the Minister, who is so new that I cannot remember which Department he is from.

Those Departments have to work together to bring this change about. Maybe this long debate will be one of the first steps in that process, but as soon as the Queen's Speech—whenever it is—is over, I intend to bring this matter back as a ten-minute rule Bill or a private Member's Bill, because it is really important that we set a good example to the rest of the world.

In addition to attempting to stop child marriage on the international stage, it is crucial that we meet the international human rights standards that have been established to put a stop to the practice. I agree with the assertion by the chairwoman of the global advocacy group, Girls Not Brides, Mabel van Oranje:

“Britain's delay in reforming its own marriage laws is increasingly counterproductive.”

Forced marriage is defined by the Home Office as “a marriage conducted without the valid consent of two parties, where duress is a factor.”

It is marriage—a lifetime commitment—entered into by an individual against their will. In the UK, law dictates that forcing someone to marry is a criminal offence. It is child abuse, domestic abuse and a form of violence against women and men.

England and Wales outlawed forced marriages in 2014. That was, in part, down to the work of a campaign by Jasvinder Sanghera of Karma Nirvana, which started in Derby. I know her well, and she has worked tirelessly with that organisation to stop forced marriage, to help girls who have been forced into marriage to escape and to make sure that girls in such marriages are safe. Many of the girls who have been married early for cultural reasons do not feel safe in their own homes.

The outlawing of forced marriage was enshrined in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, which sets out that forcing someone, including children, into marriage is illegal and can lead to a maximum of seven years in jail. Previously, the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 came into force along with forced marriage protection orders, which are designed to assist those who are threatened with forced marriage, or by a third party on someone else's behalf. Those orders can be used to prevent a forced marriage from taking place, or to protect someone who has already been forced into marriage.

I welcome the fact that in the UK, forcing someone into marriage now carries a maximum sentence of seven years in jail. I also acknowledge that in many ways the UK is a world leader in the fight against forced marriage. Unfortunately, however, that does not prevent the practice from happening. The Home Office estimates that between 5,000 and 8,000 people are at risk of being forced into marriage every year in the UK. In 2017, more than a quarter of cases dealt with by the Forced Marriage Unit involved children aged 17 and under, and the vast majority of the victims—77.8%—were female.

[Mrs Latham]

The ability to marry at 16 with parental consent is a significant discrepancy in the law here. Too often, parental consent means parental coercion for 16 and 17-year-old children, and sometimes for even younger children, because children can be taken out of school in the UK and sent to another country, where they are married at 14 and kept there until they are 16, and then brought back to the UK at 16. We are told that these girls have parental consent. The organisation Girls Not Brides warns that this “legal loophole” means that child marriages, and potentially forced marriages, are still sanctioned in the UK, because in a number of cases parents do not act as the safeguarding mechanism that the law intended them to be.

In some communities in the UK, the legality of marriage at 16 can result in forced child marriage, whereby parents can consent on behalf of their children. Furthermore, many vulnerable teenagers are being sent overseas to marry. Forced marriage is a violation of human rights and is contrary to UK law, including the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, which states that a marriage shall be voidable if

“either party to the marriage did not validly consent to it, whether in consequence to duress, mistake, unsoundness of mind or otherwise.”

Such marriages must be identified and ended. However, an amendment to the law to increase the legal age of marriage to 18 might stop these marriages in the first place, by making them an illegal impossibility here in the UK. On a personal level, individuals may be more mature and able to resist forced marriages at the age of 18, by which stage they may have managed to get to university, or to get a job after they have finished training.

Although changes to the law have helped to safeguard people from forced marriages, it is important that educational professionals and local communities are fully aware of the signs of forced marriage. The Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation’s executive director, Diana Nammi, recently stressed the importance of education in a televised interview, saying:

“We need to educate the community as well, we need to let them know that child marriage is a brutal situation.

Many of them think it is just a sexual relationship, but it’s a huge responsibility on the shoulders of the children and they are not prepared yet.”

To conclude, I strongly believe that the legal age of marriage should be increased from 16 to 18. It is important that we rewrite marriage law here, so that it is fit for the 21st century and aligns with international law.

I was pleased to learn that 79% of 2,700 respondents agreed with me that the minimum age for marriage and civil partnerships should rise from 16 to 18 in a recent poll, which was conducted between 10 and 14 May on the social media pages of the House of Commons. I thank the House’s digital engagement programme for conducting this research for me.

At the heart of this matter is a moral dilemma about our values, not only here at home but internationally. This country is an advocate on the international stage for the eradication of child marriage and we must practice what we preach. I am on the International Development Committee and I have been out to many countries and seen how some of them are trying their

best to raise the age of marriage, but that is not happening here. As I say, we must practise what we preach. Ultimately, I am in agreement with UNICEF’s assertion that “marriage before the age of 18 is a fundamental violation of human rights”.

Meanwhile, forced marriage has a profound personal impact. In a recent Sky News feature, one interviewee—Mrs Khan—recalled her experience, which captures the sad reality of forced marriage. She said:

“It took away so much freedom from me. I could have met someone I loved. Instead, I was forced to get married, forced to have children, forced to put up with so many unbearable things.”

Therefore, I would like to see the Government pass clear and consistent legislation that establishes 18 as the minimum age of marriage, with no exceptions for customary law, parental consent or judicial consent. It is also clear that increasing the minimum age of marriage to 18 would provide a vehicle to help to safeguard girls and boys from being married before they are ready, or indeed from entering into a forced marriage by legal means.

I will finish my speech today by quoting the judge, Mr Justice Peace, in the landmark legal case, *Pugh v. Pugh*, in 1951. He spoke of the capacity of young people to marry and his words are as relevant today as they were then, 70 years ago. He stated in his conclusions:

“According to modern thought it is considered socially and morally wrong that persons of age, at which we now believe them to be immature and provide for their education, should have the stresses, responsibilities and sexual freedom of marriage and the physical strain of childbirth. Child marriages by common consent are bad for the participants and bad for the institution of marriage.”

9.58 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), to his post. It is good to see him here in Westminster Hall.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) not just on raising this issue but on making what really was a powerful speech. We use the word “powerful” so often in this House, but her speech really was exemplary, setting out so many of the arguments that I am now wondering what I will say. She and I will remember our visit to Ethiopia as members of the Select Committee on International Development. We spent quite some time in a village community where DFID was working to encourage young girls to defer their marriages. It was working successfully, particularly with the community elders—the leaders—and had transformed the lives of some of those young women.

As we have heard from Mabel van Oranje, the chairman of the global advocacy group Girls Not Brides, the UK should practise what it preaches. Girls Not Brides argues that the major impacts of getting married young are that girls are more likely to drop out of school; they never have a chance to develop the vocational skills that will enable them to enter the world of work; and they are at greater risk of marital rape, domestic abuse, serious depression and health problems. All of those issues were discussed with us in those communities in Ethiopia, and the benefits of deferring marriage were clearly shown to us. Indeed, we had the opportunity to meet a number of the young women who were benefiting substantially.

I will give a couple of examples to flesh out the arguments that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has made. One of them refers to a lady called Amina, whose parents were born in Bangladesh. Interestingly, it has also been made clear to me that the proposals to change the law in Bangladesh to allow marriage at 16 cited British law as a justification. Amina—not her real name—is now a mother of four in her 30s, and lives in London. She had never talked to her husband before her wedding, just after her 17th birthday. It was an arranged marriage, arranged by her parents; it put an end to her studies and plunged her into depression. She says:

“The marriage was all about fear. I was a total stranger in my own house. I was really naive. I felt like a child myself when I had my first children...It was a big sacrifice of my life. I had no chance to explore things. I went through terrible times.”

Another example, that of Zee, has been reported by Reuters. When Zee was 13, she returned home from school one day to find an engagement party underway at her home in the north of England. Her excitement at the celebrations quickly turned to shock when she asked her mother, “Who’s getting married?” and her mother said, “It’s you!” She told Reuters that her betrothed was represented by a photo; he was an older cousin whom she had never met, who lived in Afghanistan, her parents’ country of birth. She said to the reporter:

“One day I’m not even allowed to talk to boys and the next I’m getting married...I was dressed up”—

this was at the engagement party—

“to look like a Christmas tree—very sparkly, very bling. Everyone was happy. The only person who was miserable was me”.

Zee escaped by running away from home, but many are not so fortunate. The latest figures I have from the Government’s forced marriage unit—the Minister may have more recent ones—are that of the 1,196 victims dealt with, one in four was below the age of 18. That is around 300 people. Interestingly, one in five was a male victim, so we must not forget them either.

The points that we are making are serious, because every one of those victims is an individual life. It cannot be acceptable to say that the numbers are not great; those are substantial numbers, and the impact on those young people is lifelong. The impact is not just on them, because if a marriage is good and positive, it is good not just for the people involved within it but for any children they might have and, indeed, for the community around them.

This is national Marriage Week, so the next part of my speech will touch a bit more widely on the importance of marriage. Marriage is a major life-changing decision that establishes a family, often—though not always—with children as part of it. Strong marriages contribute greatly to a stable and flourishing society, including the wellbeing of those children, so it is in all our interests to promote good marriages, including through public policy. It is what everyone wants from marriage.

However, although marriage is a source of great pleasure, it can also be challenging. At times it requires perseverance, which more often than not requires a degree of maturity in understanding human relationships, and understanding both ourselves and others. That must be very difficult at the ages of 16 or 17—and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has said, remains difficult for many years afterwards. Marriage is far easier if we make a wise choice at the outset about

who we marry and who we will be compatible with, because it is going to last a very long time. As I say, that necessitates an understanding of ourselves, as well as of others.

The Church of England marriage service says of marriage that

“No one should enter into it lightly or selfishly”.

It is

“a sign of unity and loyalty which all should...honour. It enriches society and strengthens community.”

We should not expect that of 16 or 17-year-olds, especially in today’s complex world. When my hon. Friend’s mother or grandmother was getting married, life was so much simpler: often, one married someone within one’s local community, who had grown up with the same values and customs. That so often is not the case now. Life is complicated for these young people, and they also have much higher expectations for their life fulfilment than maybe two or three generations ago. It is too big an ask to expect them to be able to make that decision at 16 or 17, even if it is their own decision and not forced on them. The risk of allowing those young people to marry is too great. We should support them and, I believe, protect them from what could be not just their most major, life-changing decision, but the most damaging decision that they could make. Making the wrong major, life-changing decision can be the biggest mistake of a lifetime.

For many reasons, I fully support my hon. Friend’s proposal. Indeed, I would go a bit further and say that anyone contemplating marriage should be offered the opportunity to take advantage of the wealth of resources out there to help people, particularly young people, make the right decision. We as policymakers could do that, for example, by promoting policy No. 11 in the manifesto to strengthen families—the Minister is smiling. I carry a copy in my handbag, virtually permanently.

Paul Maynard: I am not surprised.

Fiona Bruce: I am very glad to hear that; we are making some impact. Here is policy No. 11, which as I say, I am unashamedly talking about in national Marriage Week:

“Promote high quality marriage preparation by waiving Marriage Registration Fees for couples who take part in an accredited marriage preparation course.”

Not only would that help remove one of the financial barriers to marriage, but it would encourage the uptake of marriage preparation courses. Those courses could be kitemarked, such as the marriage preparation course for engaged couples produced by Holy Trinity Brompton. We have showcased that course, along with a number of other resources, through the all-party parliamentary group for strengthening couple relationships and reducing interparental conflict. They really are excellent materials for people who want to embark on married life with a greater understanding of what it involves. Indeed, after going through some of those courses, some people decide that they are not going to get married. Is that not success, too? Is that not helping to protect them from the heartache and disappointment that marriages can entail if they do not work out?

One of my parliamentary staff members, Sophia, attended the marriage preparation course when she was engaged; she is now married. She says that it was “very helpful and laid a strong foundation for going into marriage”,

[Fiona Bruce]

and she would recommend it. If a couple are busy, Marriage Care offers a “marriage preparation in a day” course, and there are resources on the web such as marriagebydesign.org.uk, which is made available by Care for the Family. That organisation has a host of other resources—I actually went on one of its marriage preparation courses 29 years ago, so it must work. Harry Benson has written a tiny relationship tip booklet, “Let’s stick together”, which he says contains

“simple guidelines to keep your love alive and keep you together.”

Can I recommend that the Minister considers the whole manifesto, and in particular policy No. 11, this week?

The structure of the house we live in when we start off in married life—I know that it is a struggle for some young people to find a home of their own—cannot be stable without strong foundations. No one would expect a house to stay up for long if it was not built on strong foundations; it would collapse. So, too, with marriage, which is too big an issue to leave to chance. A little help from us as policy makers, including by raising the marriage age, could go a long way to helping facilitate lifelong fulfilment for many people, as well as a more flourishing society.

10.10 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I will endeavour to be brief. I have just been doing a quick bit of research while the debate has been taking place. To start, I notice that throughout the European Union—I appreciate that that may not be regarded as a particularly good example at present—the average age of marriage is fixed at 18 legally. That varies in some cases between men and women. In the Nordic countries, for example, the age for males to marry without consent appears to be 18, while for women it can be 16, which tells us something about the problems we are facing in this day and age. That is why I asked my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) about the age of consent. There are those of us who believe, as she clearly does and as I do, that the age of marriage without or even with consent is too young and needs to be raised to 18, but we then have the problem of promoting unmarried sexual relationships, which many of us would not wish to seek to do. There is a dilemma there.

I was running a yard rule over the ages of consent, and they range from 11 in Nigeria up to Portugal at 21, though the age of consent for marriage in Portugal is 18, which presumably makes for some interesting celibate relationships between the ages of 18 and 21. I am not sure how they square that circle, but happily that is not our problem. We are here to discuss the situation that prevails and the situation we would like to see prevail in the United Kingdom.

I have listened to the arguments of my hon. Friends the Members for Mid Derbyshire and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), and I concur with virtually everything they said, but I do not think we are here this morning to preach, and I am not here to sit in judgment on my fellow man or, in this case, more particularly, my fellow woman. Relationships and cultures vary, but we live in a United Kingdom that sets its norms and standards by the wishes of our population, and, in so far as it is possible—I think it is right to use the phrase that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire used—we

try to set a gold standard. We seek to do what is right for the young men and women of our country, of whatever colour, class, denomination or creed.

I hope you will permit this, Mr Bailey, but I will digress very slightly. During the debates on same-sex relationships—note that I use the word “relationships”—as a Christian and an Anglican, I apparently heretically raised the proposal that marriage, a word I use advisedly, is a relationship between a man and a woman with a view to procreation and that anything else is a partnership. That is something that prevails not only in the Christian faith, but in many other faiths—probably most. I put forward the suggestion that we should recognise the fundamental difference between a civil union and a faith marriage and that the word “marriage” should be reserved for faith. I would have got rid of registry office weddings and civil unions and had one category of civil partnership, whether heterosexual or same-sex, for everything else. That would have made a much safer definition for everyone, but unhappily we did not go down that road at the time, because that was not the way the political wind or political correctness were going.

While seeking to recognise the separation between the age of consent and marriage, or civil union—in this context, I will use “civil union” from now on—it seems to me that one of the duties we have is to protect young people from predatory older adults of whatever sex. I can just about remember when I was 16. I suspect I was fairly vulnerable; I suspect most of us were and I suspect that young people today still are, in the main, in the United Kingdom, which is what we are talking about.

I understand the culture of arranged marriages, but that is not what we practise in our culture. I do not think they are advisable or desirable, but if such marriages are going to take place and that is the nature of the culture, I see no reason whatever why even an arranged marriage should not be arranged at 18, rather than 16. I take the point that has been made that 18 ought to allow a child to have a childhood, an education and a degree of maturity, whether male or female, before entering into what for some of us is the most sacred of unions. By the way, I speak as a hypocrite, because I am a divorced married man. I am happily married now, but I have to concede that my “till death us do part” vows did not hold. I want to set the record straight on that. I am unable, in the terms of my faith, to marry the lady whom I love and live with in a Christian church because technically, in the eyes of the Lord, I am still married.

Although I support the motion, I want to put down one caveat, which is that comparisons with other continents are dangerous. I have worked as an international election observer in many countries for some years, but particularly throughout the continent of Africa, where the voting age is 18, as it is in most countries. I recall very vividly challenging a young lady about her voting intention as she was queueing to vote. I asked her to produce a card, which she did. She had an ID card that claimed she was over 18. Well, that young lady was certainly not a day over 13, but she was carrying a baby on her back, and it was her baby. It was borne in upon me by local people that although this young lady was probably well under 18, sadly, in the terms of that particular country, where the average lifespan for a young woman is still probably only about 35, she was actually nearly halfway through her life.

If we look at it from that point of view, to suggest that that union, inside or outside of marriage, should not have taken place, becomes ridiculous. We have to recognise that while we may set an example and want to raise the bar ourselves and say, “This is what is right for our young people,” it ill behoves us to go to far-flung places to try to tell other people in other countries with other cultures and, sadly, other life expectancies, how to live.

Mrs Latham: I understand what my right hon. Friend says, but the girl is a child. If he thinks she was only 13, she must have been pregnant when she was 12. Whatever the culture of the country, it is a terrible burden for her, however long her life will be. She could have had the child at that age as a result of rape. She probably was not married. If she was married, it was probably a forced marriage. I cannot agree with his point, because that girl should never have had a child at that age. Whether she lives to 35 or 95, it matters not; her body is not ready for it. I fundamentally disagree with the point that he has made.

Sir Roger Gale: I knew it would be a point of disagreement; it was fairly inevitable. That is why I said carefully that I do not think we can come here and preach this morning. Secondly, while we are entitled to set our own gold standards and yardsticks, we should not seek to impose them on other people in other countries with other cultures. We can set an example and help to raise standards of living and life expectancy in other countries through our aid programmes and in other ways, but we cannot tell them what they should do.

The reality on the ground is precisely the reality that my hon. Friend conceded when she said we could not fix the age of marriage in this country to the age of consent. We have to live with the reality internationally. The reality in this country can well be marriage at 18, and in my view and my hon. Friend’s view, it should be, but to say that we are going to stand like Canute at the waves’ side and tell the tide to go away is nonsense. Realistically, politically and practicably, we will not be able to raise the age of consent. It simply will not happen.

There is an incompatibility between the age of consent argument and what we are proposing, which I endorse: the age of marriage at 18. I would prefer people to be married or in a formal, legal civil union before they have children, but in reality that is not the case. With those caveats, I am pleased to support my hon. Friend’s motion.

10.22 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I welcome the Minister to his place and congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) on securing this important debate. I thank Members for their valuable contributions today. The hon. Lady argued for raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnerships, which I will respond to, but first I will lay out the current position.

The current law in England and Wales states that the minimum age for marriage or civil partnership without parental consent is 18. The number of 16 and 17-year-olds who married in 2016 stood at just 179, so the number of young people deciding to get married with their parents’ consent before they turn 18 is a relatively small group. But we must ensure that access to marriage and civil

partnership is equal. The introduction of the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration Etc.) Act 2019, which the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) worked so hard to secure, extended civil partnerships in England and Wales to non-same sex couples. The Labour party has a proud history of establishing equality—it introduced the Civil Partnership Act 2004 and equalised the age of consent—and I am very proud that this place introduced an equal marriage Bill that became law. Now civil partners can convert their partnership to a marriage if they so wish.

The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire has made various arguments for raising the minimum age for marriage and civil partnerships to protect against forced marriage. It is of the utmost importance that we protect vulnerable individuals who are exploited and coerced into a forced marriage. Forced marriage is a vile, dangerous and abhorrent practice, and we must ensure that those who fall victim to it are protected. Sadly, the practice takes place across the UK, and we need to do more to protect the vulnerable and offer them the dignified support that is required to free them from such relationships.

Statistics from the forced marriage unit show that in 2017, where the age was known, 15% of cases involved victims below 16 years of age, and nearly 30% involved those under 18, so the UK Government must do more to ensure that victims of forced marriage are listened to and given the support they require. Those who force vulnerable individuals into marriage—for example, to secure immigration status in the UK—must be challenged. Although I welcome the steps that the Government are taking against forced marriage, including their public consultation into introducing a legal mandatory reporting duty relating to cases of forced marriage, they have been too slow to react and those who are suffering now need urgent help.

I get what the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire says regarding maturity, but if we allow people to join the Army and buy a lottery ticket at 16, and given that Wales is currently consulting on lowering the voting age to 16, we cannot say that they are mature enough to do all of those things, but not mature enough to marry. I know several couples who met in school, married at 16 and have had wonderful married lives together. I also know many people who got married at 40 and within 18 months could not stand the sight of each other.

Sir Roger Gale: I think I am absolutely correct in saying that although it is technically possible for somebody to join the Army as a boy soldier at 16, they are not allowed to engage in combat until they are an adult.

Carolyn Harris: I do not disagree with the right hon. Gentleman; I was making the case that they were eligible to join the Army at 16.

Couples can fall out of love at any age; I do not believe that age plays any part in how their future develops. If this debate was about protecting people from forced marriage, I would 100% agree with the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire, and if it was about thousands and thousands of 16-year-olds getting married and then finding themselves getting divorced a few months later, I would also agree, but in reality we are talking about a very small number of young people who decide to get married very young for whatever reason. I remain receptive to the arguments, but I want to see a bigger conversation. Far be it from us to stand in the way of

[Carolyn Harris]

love's young dream. I cannot honestly say that if my 16-year-old son came to me and said he wanted to get married, I would be best pleased, but I would support his decision and help him and his future partner in any way I could.

I really do appreciate the hon. Lady's sentiments, but can we truly say that by increasing the age for marriage and civil partnerships to 18 we will stop forced marriage and unwanted pregnancies, and stop people remaining in happy relationships purely because they are 16? Let us have a bigger debate and work collectively to ensure that we protect and offer equality for all.

10.27 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) for giving me such a fascinating first outing as the Minister responsible for family justice. I had never given the subject a moment's thought until Saturday morning when I learned it was on the agenda. I have had a fascinating few days thinking about it. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) for their interesting comments. I also thank the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), my parliamentary next-door neighbour—not geographically, although we share an interest in tidal barrages, but in terms of where our offices are on the parliamentary estate.

The debate has been fascinating. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire has a compelling track record on this issue. I pay genuine tribute to her for the knowledge, advocacy and expertise that she brings to the issue. I have listened carefully and thought deeply about the points she has made, which should be the start of a dialogue. As the Minister, I have to take an administrative approach predicated upon the evidence presented to me. The Government understand the concerns about any possible link between marriages involving parties aged 16 and 17 and forced marriage more generally. As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton pointed out—in this, national Marriage Week—marriage will always be one of our most important institutions, but only where consenting parties enter of their own free will and free choice. There can be no doubt that it is a serious violation to be deprived of marital autonomy, and the potential cost for victims of any age, gender or background is abundantly clear.

As the hon. Member for Swansea East pointed out, we announced the launch of a forced marriage public consultation, which sought views on issues such as a possible mandatory reporting duty, requiring certain professionals to report cases of forced marriage and how Government guidance should be updated. In answer to a question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire, the Prime Minister said that we will look specifically at whether there is any link between parents giving consent to marry and instances of forced marriage. When we analyse the consultation responses, we will look specifically for that connection. The consultation is now closed. The responses are being sifted as we speak, and we will take a close interest in the analysis that emerges.

It may be helpful to tell all Members present what they already know and to clarify the position on the age of marriage. All UK jurisdictions require that marriage or civil partnership is entered into freely. In England and Wales, the age of majority is 18, but the law provides for marriage or civil partnership at 16 or 17 if the requirement for consents, including judicial consent when parental consent is unavailable, has been met. That requirement is a longstanding one and operates alongside the work of registration officers, who are trained to spot signs of forced marriage and take notice of the intention to marry without the other party, parents or relatives present.

That goes back to the important point made by the hon. Member for Swansea East about the different ages of maturity that emerge. She rightly pointed out the growing debate about whether we should have votes at 16. At the other end, I believe that someone cannot operate a tarmac roller until they are 21. There is still a spectrum of what we consider, as wider society, to be the point at which we reach adulthood and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet pointed out, there is a range of options across Europe and the wider developed world regarding when marriage can occur.

Some US states allow marriage at 18 as of right, and at 16 if some conditions are met. Other countries have taken other approaches. Spain, for example, raised the minimum age to 16, with consents for under-18s, in response to specific concerns about child marriage and forced marriage. Sweden raised the minimum age of marriage in 2014, removing the ability of under-18s to marry with consents. Those differences demonstrate that there is no clear consensus yet in the developed world regarding the minimum age. However, we should continually monitor the impact of changes and their effectiveness, particularly in what goes on around the world more widely.

We have discussed the numbers of people affected in the UK. As the hon. Member for Swansea East pointed out, in 2016, the last year for which we have figures, only 179 people aged 16 or 17 entered an opposite-sex marriage—down from 424 in 2006. Clearly, it is a declining feature of our marriage system. None the less, I strongly take the point that, whether the number of people affected is 400, 100, 10 or one, we should still have the issue at the forefront of our mind.

The British social attitudes report identifies a dramatic shift in British society's opinions on marriage, and changing norms about formal and informal unions. Men and women have increasingly been marrying at a later age because of their education, employment and economic opportunities, without any prompt by legislative change. I would be fascinated to see any research on the reasons of those 179 under-18s for marriage. I am sure that a charity, think-tank or group out there will take up that challenge, so we will not have to speculate about who those 179 people are. That might help us to identify the extent to which forced marriage is a component.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire made it clear that the fact that consents are needed shows that people might not be mature enough to make those decisions themselves. I understand that, but it is worth pointing out that consents are not a loophole; the law derives from the concept of the age of majority. When the age of majority for getting married was 21,

consents were required for anyone under that age. A long-standing provision exists not to make an exception for people to marry at certain ages, but to respect what Parliament has previously determined to be the age of majority.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet introduced the important point that consequential changes would follow were the proposed change enacted. Where would it leave the age of consent? That is a whole new debate that would open up. There would also be consequential changes on other pieces of legislation that involve marriage, dating well back in our statute book. I realise how deeply felt the implications might be, and any change requires careful thought and engagement. Wider policies are brought in, in terms of what happens in Northern Ireland and Scotland, when we, yet again, have different regimes and disparities are introduced. We need to take into account the legal, moral and societal repercussions of any change such as the one proposed. The Government have a duty to explore that carefully in my view.

Perhaps most pertinently, we have to consider whether any such change would affect the incidence of forced marriage in the UK. Raising the domestic marriage age would not by itself prevent people from marrying informally, such as in a religious ceremony that was not legally binding, or from marrying abroad. Amending the minimum age of marriage would not necessarily deter perpetrators from coercing children into marriage through another route, or make the crime of forced marriage any more visible than it is currently. It is also unclear whether a change in the law would necessarily change the attitudes of families and communities who want to exert control over a young person's decision to marry.

As I said at the beginning, I will look carefully at the consultation responses to try to identify themes that might emerge and that might help to buttress the case, or perhaps diminish it—who knows? However, there is clearly an important international dimension to the debate, as many Members have set out in much more depth than I could. I will not repeat ad nauseam the points made about the work that we have been doing as a Government with the forced marriage unit. I am immensely grateful for all its efforts. The fact that, of more than 1,900 applications since it came into being, more than 1,800 have been granted demonstrates that there is an issue that we need to deal with and that, so far, our actions are having the desired effect. We are sending a clear message that the abhorrent practice of forced marriage is unacceptable and the UK will not tolerate it, domestically or overseas.

Although the number of 16 and 17-year-olds marrying in England and Wales continues to decline, worldwide one in four women are married under 18, and one in 12, incredibly, is married under 15. There is a broad range of contributors to the problem in less developed countries, including community and cultural pressures, a lack of education or employment opportunities, and stigma around illegitimacy. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet, whose name I saw pop up on the all-party parliamentary group's 2012 report, which looked into this issue and brought it to the forefront of public debate.

I agree that the international dimension is crucial, and we must continue to have it at the forefront of our mind. I reassure Members that the debate will not end

today. I will continue to show an interest, but there are many strands that have to be pulled together. I am open to ongoing dialogue with Members, but I am conscious of the limitations that might be found in merely enacting the proposed change. I thank everyone for their contributions and look forward to seeing Members more frequently, I suspect, in Westminster Hall discussing many similar issues.

10.38 am

Mrs Latham: It has been a really interesting debate, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) for taking part. I know that many others wanted to contribute but were unable to attend. I hear what everybody has had to say.

I urge the Minister to work with the Ministry of Justice and the Department for International Development to see if we can agree to look at the issue firmly. I know that the Justice Minister who has oversight of this matter is keen to bring it in—

Paul Maynard: The Home Office.

Mrs Latham: Sorry—the Home Office. I am confusing my Departments again. Furthermore, those in DFID look rather foolish if they are telling other countries to raise the age of marriage to 18, so I think they will also be keen to take this matter on.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend puts her finger on a point that those of us who promote strengthening families make time and again: no single Department is overseeing the issue, because it straddles several Departments. We need a senior Minister, ideally at Cabinet level, to oversee the issues that affect families.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. We have a little time available, so I have been fairly lenient in allowing interventions on what should be just a summing-up speech, but I ask hon. Members not to abuse that leniency.

Mrs Latham: Thank you, Mr Bailey. The Minister said that there are not many marriages under the age of 18, but actually I think the issue is under-reported: there are more forced marriages than we know about, and we need to protect girls from them.

The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) spoke about children being able to sign up to the Army. However, it could be argued that that is education and training, because up to the age of 18 they cannot fight on the frontline. That is just what we have legislated for; we want people to stay in education and training until that age.

It is interesting that this debate has come up in National Marriage Week, which is an important thing. I am not trying to stop teenagers who have fallen in love at school, who are love's young dream and who want to get married, but I think that they can wait until they are 18. There is no compulsion for them to get married that much earlier; waiting would give them time to reflect.

Northern Ireland and Scotland have been mentioned, but the marriage age should probably be a devolved matter, so we should look just at England and Wales. I

[Mrs Latham]

am sure that Northern Ireland would not disagree that 18 is the right age, but I think Scotland would argue differently.

Finally, I recommend that the Minister reads Jasvinder Sanghera's book "Shame", which tells her life story. She has written several other books, including "Daughters of Shame". Her story is quite sobering. Her sister had a forced marriage under the age of 18; she was taken away, forced to marry somebody she did not know and brought back to this country. It was a very unhappy marriage, and in the end she decided to cover herself in petrol and set herself alight. That was in the streets of Derby; it is very close to my heart. I recommend "Shame" because it shows the realities of forced marriage. It is slightly out of date, because it happened a few years ago, but the point stands.

Increasing the minimum age will not stop forced marriage, but children of 18 are that much more mature and have more of an opportunity to tell their parents, "No, I don't want to do this. I want to go to university, study and make something of my life." I urge the Minister to work with other Departments to make our proposal a reality. I will be bringing it back after the Queen's Speech, so I urge him to get on with it, please.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the minimum age for marriage and civil partnership.

10.43 am

Sitting suspended.

Rape Trials: Treatment of Victims

11 am

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rape trials and CPS treatment of victims.

It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Mr Bailey. I was recently privileged to meet an extraordinary and courageous young woman from my constituency at my weekly MP's surgery. She told me that in May last year a man had attempted to rape her on her way home from a night spent with friends. Physically hurt and emotionally distraught, she made the brave decision to go to the police and seek justice for herself and our community. I was saddened to learn that at the most vulnerable time in her life, when she was most in need of human care and protection, she had been left feeling let down by our justice system.

Time and again, this lady has repeated that although she cannot change what has happened to her, she can try to change what happens to others. As her Member of Parliament, I feel it is only right to speak on behalf of my constituent, who is a voice for many other survivors of rape, attempted rape and sexual assault, to draw attention to the need for urgent Government reform.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I hear what my right hon. Friend says, and I wonder whether he will take back to his constituent the heartfelt feelings of the House for the ordeal that she went through—please convey our best wishes to her. This is not something new or limited to this incident: there are plenty of examples of how the Crown Prosecution Service has not handled this sort of thing very well. I applaud him for what he is trying to do with this debate.

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for coming today. He will find out that we are trying to do exactly what he said. My constituent is in the Public Gallery—not because she can change what has happened to her, but because we can try to change things for the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on everything he does in the House, and particularly on this case. I commend him for what he is doing on behalf of his constituents. There have been 820 accusations of rape in Northern Ireland, but only 15 convictions. Does he believe that the CPS, in co-ordination with the police forces, can enable more cases to be tried successfully by offering greater support to the victims and their families—in other words, by working together on behalf of the victim?

Robert Halfon: As so often, the hon. Gentleman gets it in one. From what I am about to say, he will see that I agree with him. I am sure the Minister is listening to what he and my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) are saying.

First, I want to raise the issues of sentencing for attempted rape and the lack of transparency in published statistics. Secondly, I want to turn to the treatment of victims who report their assault, and call for Government action to make this process easier. We must strive to ensure that justice is served and that there is always compassion and support for the victim.

Section 1(4) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 sets out that the maximum penalty for rape is life imprisonment. Under the Criminal Attempts Act 1981, a person who attempts to commit the full offence of rape shall also be liable for a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. In the case of my Harlow constituent, her attacker had the intention, or *mens rea*, to commit the full offence. Had it not been for the fact that she had the sheer physical strength to fight him off until a security guard heard her screaming for help and intervened, his attempt might have been undeterred.

In their legislative form, the offences of attempted rape and rape are considered punishable by equal measure. However, by taking into account the circumstances of the case under the Sentencing Council's guidelines, the court often imposes a lesser sentence on perpetrators of attempted rape because they have not committed the *actus reus* of rape. For my Harlow constituent, she feels let down by the justice system—robbed of the possibility of a longer sentence for the perpetrator because she fought so hard to fend him off. Will the Minister clarify the Sentencing Council's guidelines for attempted rape and the basis on which their effectiveness as a means of securing justice is tested?

Another key problem on the subject of sentencing for sexual offences is the lack of clarity in the statistics. I welcome the Justice Secretary's response to my letter on sentencing for attempted rape, but I was shocked by his acknowledgement that

"The Ministry of Justice does not disaggregate attempted rape from rape offences by sentence length in published figures."

Can the Minister tell us whether the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Justice will commit to transparency in sentencing figures for rape and attempted rape, so that we have a much clearer basis on which to assess the suitability of existing law? Will she ensure that this is clearly published, rather than buried in spreadsheets and data tools?

Only 15% of sexual violence cases are reported to the police, and only 7.5% of rape charges result in conviction. These statistics are devastating and demand urgent Government attention. A whole host of factors might well be to blame for these figures: a high threshold for sufficient evidence; the CPS's continuous demand for more intrusive personal data, including from mobile phones; and the myths surrounding what constitutes rape, to name but a few. However, some responsibility must be borne by the treatment of victims before, during and after trial. We are discouraging people from reporting their assault or forcing them to drop charges, because they cannot bear to continue.

After making the courageous decision to give her statement to the police, the process of my Harlow constituent's fight for justice has been arduous and often extremely uncomfortable. It is important that I go through some of her experiences in detail—sadly, my constituent's account is not unique. In the immediate aftermath of the incident, she waited eight hours in discomfort, exhaustion and emotional trauma to have forensic evidence collected at the sexual assault referral centre, or SARC. She was not permitted to wash and was asked to strip down before being swabbed from head to toe and photographed. She was then interviewed and asked intrusive personal questions. At the time, she was constantly waiting for nurses, police and support staff to attend to her.

As they are often the first port of call after an assault, SARCs play a crucial role in the victim's ability to secure justice. It is possibly the most critical part of the process in obtaining forensic evidence that can be used by the prosecution at trial. However, we make victims wait in distress and discomfort, because otherwise they risk evidence being lost due to a lack of qualified staff. The rape support fund has been a cornerstone for support services, and I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's commitment under the victims strategy to increase spending from £31 million in 2016-17 to £39 million in 2020-21. The solution is not necessarily throwing more money at the problem, although more money will always be welcome; it is essential that money is being used wisely and efficiently to maximise reach.

NHS England says that SARCs delivered services to 20,000 people in 2017-18. In the same year, Rape Crisis supported 78,000 individuals on £10 million less funding. What measure will the Minister take to ensure that the £39 million is used to staff SARCs properly? While they are not staffed properly, we are not only adding to the distress and anguish of victims, but potentially risking the successful prosecution of people who commit such horrific acts. Additionally, the all-party parliamentary group on sexual violence, together with Rape Crisis, has identified concerns about increased competition for this extra money and whether there will be any significant changes to individual centres.

The consequences, of course, are felt by the end user—the victim. As my constituent's experience shows, the Government's commitment to strengthen victim support, although wholly admirable, does not always trickle down to the people using the services. For example, sexual assault victims do not get the psychological support that they need. Waiting times for counselling are as long as one year, and the counselling sessions that individuals are offered may be just for a few weeks.

My constituent realised that she needed much more counselling. She actively pressed for more, and was given it. On top of her emotional trauma, she felt guilty that she may have been depriving someone else of vital support. People who have already been through an emotional and horrific ordeal should not be concerned about that. Will the Minister ensure that the additional funding outlined in the Government's victims strategy will be channelled to staff support services properly, minimise waiting times and allow survivors to start getting on with their lives?

In the months leading up to the trial, my constituent was contacted regularly by the police, who asked more questions and wanted more statements, interviews and photographs of the bruising. The trial took more than a week and a half. She had to express her discomfort at the idea that her attacker would be in the same room as her before a screen was put up. She described the trial and cross-examination as:

"A torturous experience of being asked the most vulgar questions...based on the attacker's recall of the event, which made me feel so uncomfortable and emotional, whilst being forced under pressure by the lawyer".

Even after a guilty verdict has been reached, victims are still not free to get on with their lives. My constituent had to wait months before her attacker was sentenced to six years.

Survivors of assault put themselves through that not because they want to, but because it is their only hope of building a case, and yet we jeopardise it by making

[Robert Halfon]

the process so difficult. Minister, what can be done to speed up the process from reporting to the police to sentencing, so we do not prolong the suffering for longer than is wholly necessary?

Since the perpetrator's imprisonment, my constituent has been asked by her attacker's parole board to fill in reams of paperwork to put in place measures not only for her, but for him. Although he got six years—now reduced to just three—my constituent feels like she has been served with a life sentence. She is reeling from the anguish and suffering she experienced. Why on earth should she—the innocent party and victim—face a never ending struggle to keep the perpetrator in prison and feel some sense of safety?

I recognise that resources are limited, and that this is a particularly sensitive area of the law, but we cannot sit by and ignore the problems. The statistics relating to this area of justice are dire, as has been highlighted, and they are not getting any better. In 2017-18, the number of rape referrals from the police to the CPS fell by 9%, the number of suspects charged for rape fell by 8% and the number of rape prosecutions fell by 13%. The volume of sexual offence prosecutions excluding rape also fell by 11%.

My constituent suffered because of the lenient justice system. She suffered in the reporting of the attempted rape and suffered again in the aftermath. That is just wrong. She, like every rape and sexual assault survivor, has suffered enough. The Government must review all these areas and ensure that no one feels let down by the justice system again.

11.14 am

The Solicitor General (Lucy Frazer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for raising this very important issue. I acknowledge his constituent's terrible ordeal, and I am truly sorry that she feels let down by our justice system. Rape, attempted rape and other serious sexual offences are devastating crimes. I cannot begin to imagine what his constituent has been through. I commend her for her courage in speaking out, reporting the crime, raising her experience with her MP, and continuing to draw attention to the ways in which we can improve the system. I commend her for that, because it is only through reporting crimes that people are brought to justice, and other women who could be victims are saved a terrible ordeal. I thank her for going through the process, which I understand has been extremely difficult.

John Howell: Does the Minister think there is an opportunity to refer this matter to the Victims' Commissioner? We have just appointed a new Victims' Commissioner, Vera Baird, and I wonder whether it would be useful to report this. She is responsible for ensuring equal performance across the whole gamut of the justice system.

The Solicitor General: I have already had the honour of liaising with Vera Baird, and I very much look forward to discussing this issue with her. The issue of consistency across police forces and the CPS, and within local authorities that deal with rape victims, is very important. We will be discussing these issues, and I am sure she will have considerable insight into them.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow for raising this issue. I am very pleased to see the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) in the Chamber. I look forward to hearing about her expertise in this very important area.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow said that it is important that we treat victims sensitively and with respect. I agree. I am pleased to have the opportunity today, in my first debate in my new role, to discuss how we can improve the system and what we are already doing. My right hon. Friend went through many issues thoroughly, and I want to respond to them. He said that the sentences for rape and attempted rape start similarly. Rape carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment, and he is right that attempted rape has the same maximum penalty. A judge will have regard to the sentencing guidelines for the substantive offence, but he then selects a starting point based on harm and culpability as if he were sentencing for the full offence. He will then reduce the starting point at the lower end of the category range to reflect the fact that it was an attempted rape, not a rape. The amount of the reduction will depend on how close the offence was to being completed, and a judgment will be made on a case-by-case basis.

I realise that victims of rape and attempted rape will be extremely traumatised, but they should know that, regardless of the sentence imposed by the court, anyone convicted or cautioned for a relevant sexual offence is automatically made subject to notification requirements—in other words, they are placed on the sex offenders register. The court can also make a sexual harm prevention order on anyone convicted or cautioned for a relevant sexual offence, which can prohibit the individual from doing anything described within it, as long as the court has determined it to be proportionate and necessary.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned the lack of clarity in the statistics. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of data. I assure him that the Ministry of Justice is conscious of the importance of data and transparency. During my time there, we worked with the media to improve public transparency. When we build a common platform for taking cases in the criminal justice process through a digital system, we will use it to improve the collection of data, which can then be shared. My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the distinction between the statistics collected on rape and attempted rape. I will pass that on to the Ministry of Justice so it can address the collection of its data as the common platform develops. With better data, we can have better scrutiny.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the treatment of victims and how they feel treated. He is right to say that the figures for reporting and for convictions could be better. That is not a new issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley rightly pointed out, but we have some positive news. According to the most recent figures in the year ending June 2018, there was an 18% increase in reporting of sexual offences. The CPS has also doubled the number of specialist prosecutors in its dedicated rape and serious sexual offences units.

We need to improve the care of those brave enough to come forward. The CPS is working with the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to revise the victims' code, to improve the support and care offered to victims. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned,

cross-Department and cross-agency work is important. The CPS is also working with the police to ensure that we improve the process of the criminal justice system.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow mentioned mental health, which is very important. I cannot begin to imagine the consequences of such an ordeal for someone's mental health. We are launching a new toolkit for therapists and prosecutors on the support that an individual who suffers from a mental health condition will require.

My right hon. Friend mentioned his constituents' use of a screen, which is an important part of the special provisions in court. We are trying to improve access to special measures, and the Ministry of Justice has committed to recording and monitoring applications for special measures, to ensure that everyone who is entitled to them can access them.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the role of sexual assault referral centres, or SARCs, and the significant funds invested in them. NHS England investment in SARC services increased from £8 million in 2013 to £31 million in 2018-19. As he mentioned, that funding has risen this year and will rise further next year. He is right, however, to say that, as with all public services, funding alone is not sufficient; it needs to be well spent. I say to him that, locally, police and NHS England commissioners have meetings with providers to review their performance. Nationally, NHS England undertakes internal assurance to look at cost, performance and quality, as well as areas of emergent risk.

I am deeply sorry that my right hon. Friend's constituent had to wait a long time in a SARC. I understand that long waits in SARCs are unusual, as a referral is usually immediate for adults, and an out-of-hours policy states that a SARC can be opened for a referral, which can take up to two hours. I am sorry about her experience. The police, police and crime commissioners and the NHS should all hold SARCs to account. The Care Quality Commission has also started to inspect SARCs and publish the findings on its website. It is extremely important that we ensure that SARCs, which receive public funding, work well.

My right hon. Friend mentioned delays and the time that it takes not only for a case to come to court, but to go through court. It is true that sexual offence cases take longer to go through the criminal justice system than other cases. That is because sexual offences, especially rape, are some of the most challenging and complex cases with which the CPS deals. Yesterday, I met the Director of Public Prosecutions and I raised the issue of delays when such cases go through the system. He made the same point that I have about the difficulty in evidencing those types of cases. He stressed the importance of ensuring that when such traumatic cases are reported, sufficient work is done to ensure a fair trial and that, at the end of the day, if the perpetrator is guilty, he or she is brought to justice.

Unfortunately, successful prosecutions take time. We want to speed up the court process and ensure that cases are heard effectively. I know, through my time at

the MOJ, that in both Crown court and magistrates court we are trying to reform the process to ensure that cases are heard more efficiently, through transforming summary justice and better case management systems in both jurisdictions.

This is a terribly important area because people who suffer from serious violent sexual offences—or attempted serious violent sexual offences—may deal with the consequences for life, as we heard from my right hon. Friend. It is therefore important that, as a Government, we continue to look at how we can improve the criminal justice system when dealing with such offences.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I join the Minister in thanking the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for bringing this case forward. I am sure that he will have given his constituent enormous moral support and made her feel that, after a traumatic offence has been committed against her and she feels that the criminal justice system has failed her, she has at least had his full support as he has brought her case to the House. The points arising from her case are so important.

I warmly congratulate the Minister, who I am delighted to see in her new post as Solicitor General. She will take all of these issues forward. I know that her appointment, as well as her support for those in the criminal justice system who want and strive to improve it—particularly in the Crown Prosecution Service—will be welcomed. For my part, I will certainly do everything that I can to help her work.

The Solicitor General: I thank the right hon. and learned Lady for her comments. It is an honour to follow her in this role, albeit not immediately. She has done a significant amount of work on this matter and continues to do so. I very much look forward to working with her on this important area, which we as a Government want to improve.

It is important to understand the personal experiences of those who have gone through the process so that we can better make change. Although I hope that the constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow will feel that she has some level of personal support, I reiterate that, by coming forward and raising the issue, she has helped to improve the justice system more broadly.

We in Government take such issues extremely seriously. We have already committed to a number of measures, some of which I have had time to mention, some of which I have not. In March, as part of the violence against women and girls refresh, we started an end-to-end review of the criminal justice system response to rape and sexual offences cases, which is ongoing. Debates such as this and hearing personal experiences are so important because they feed into that process. I thank my right hon. Friend and his constituent for a further opportunity to debate this very important matter.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

British Sign Language Users: Access to NHS Services

[JOAN RYAN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): I draw hon. Members' attention to the fact that our proceedings are being made accessible to people who are deaf or hearing impaired. The interpreters in the Chamber are using British Sign Language, and the debate will be broadcast on Parliament TV with live subtitles and British Sign Language interpretation.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered access to NHS services for British Sign Language users.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Ms Ryan. I am pleased that we have the BSL interpreters here in the Chamber for the debate and that it will also be covered by simultaneous live BSL interpretation and subtitling on the parliamentlive.tv footage.

I have been trying to secure a debate on this important subject for several months, because for some time now I have been raising the issues with the Government and a number of other organisations. This afternoon's debate is timely as well, taking place just days after Deaf Awareness Week, which was from 6 to 12 May. As I am sure hon. Members and the Minister are aware, Deaf Awareness Week aims to increase awareness and challenge perceptions of hearing loss and deafness, promote positive aspects of deafness, promote social inclusion and raise awareness of the huge range of organisations throughout the country that support deaf people and their family and friends. That includes the ITV SignPost team, which offers content production, access services and training from their base in Gateshead.

Sadly, given the subject of the debate, there appears to be no reference to Deaf Awareness Week on the websites of the Department of Health and Social Care, NHS England or indeed the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department with overall responsibility for cross-Government disability issues. I am pleased that many local NHS organisations, including the Newcastle Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, have marked Deaf Awareness Week. The key thrust of my argument, however, is that all public bodies should be aware of and provide for the needs of deaf people, including BSL users, not just one week of the year but 52 weeks of the year. As I will highlight, on far too many occasions that is certainly not happening.

According to the British Deaf Association, the UK has about 151,000 users of British Sign Language, of whom 87,000 are deaf. That first figure does not include professional BSL users, such as interpreters and translators, unless they use it at home. As the BDA has described:

"Sign languages are fully functional and expressive languages; at the same time they differ profoundly from spoken languages. BSL is a visual-gestural language with distinctive grammar using handshapes, facial expressions, gestures and body language to convey meaning."

Like spoken languages, sign language is not international and is not derived from the spoken language of a country. For example, the UK, Ireland and the US all have entirely separate sign languages, despite speaking the language of English in common.

In 1988, the European Parliament passed a resolution on sign languages, proposing that every member state should recognise its own national sign language as the official language of deaf people in that country, which on 18 March 2003 the British Government did. In 2009, the UK Government went on to ratify the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, which states that Governments must uphold rights by

"Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages...in official interactions...and...Recognising and promoting the use of sign languages."

BSL, however, still does not have any legal or protected language status, despite many deaf organisations campaigning for that since the early 1980s. Back in 2014, the British Deaf Association published a detailed discussion paper and highlighted the

"policy apathy about the shocking levels of linguistic exclusion we face as individuals and as a community",

and,

"the shocking extent to which Deaf people are denied their civil rights."

The paper itself highlighted the good practice that takes place in Finland, New Zealand, Austria and Hungary and set out why our Equality Act 2010 was not working as intended for deaf people—an issue to which I will return. Of course, since that paper was published, the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 has been passed, requiring the Scottish Government to create a BSL national plan for Scotland to set out their strategy for promoting BSL. That was produced in 2017. The Act also required all other listed bodies such as local authorities to establish their own BSL plans.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister whether her Government have made, or intend to make, any progress towards providing BSL with legal status on a UK-wide level. I recognise, however, that she might have difficulty in doing so, given that it remains somewhat unclear just who has overarching responsibility for promoting and protecting BSL within and across Government.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned the European Union, but another organisation in Europe, the Council of Europe, covers 47 countries. It has already looked at the issue and suggested that countries need to emphasise their BSL equivalents and undertake training to ensure that that is available. Has she seen that report, and does she think it is something that we might like to support?

Catherine McKinnell: It is an important report, obviously, but I am interested to hear whether the Government have considered it, what their response is and how that would fit with their overall requirements to better meet our obligations on such issues in this country.

In preparing for this afternoon's debate, I of course looked back to the 30 November 2017 debate on deafness and hearing loss secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who is present in the Chamber today. In that debate, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health commented:

"It is not entirely clear to me which Department would lead on legal recognition of British Sign Language, which is the problem that so many people have referred to today. I am sympathetic to the calls for strengthening the role of British Sign Language. We want to see as many people trained and providing support as

possible. At this time, Her Majesty's Government are not yet convinced that the way to achieve that is through legislation."—[*Official Report*, 30 November 2017; Vol. 632, c. 236WH.]

I therefore look forward to hearing from the Minister whether that position has changed. In the light of some of the issues to which I will refer, I hope it has.

For some time I have been working with a number of local deaf organisations on the significant challenges faced by far too many deaf people in accessing services, information and support. Those organisations include the Newcastle-based charity Becoming Visible, but also Deaflink North East, in particular since I attended a hustings that it organised for the local deaf community ahead of the 2015 general election. At the time, the overwhelming sense of frustration felt by many deaf people about continually having to demand, to challenge, or to fight to access even basic services that most of us take for granted was palpable.

Since then, I have worked to do what I can to make myself accessible to deaf people in Newcastle North as their Member of Parliament, including by launching a BSL section on my website with the support of Deaflink North East, to whom I am extremely grateful. The page includes a subtitled video of a person using BSL to explain, in accessible language, my role as a Member of Parliament, including the types of issues I can help constituents with. Perhaps most importantly, it also makes it clear that should any BSL user from Newcastle North wish to attend one of my surgeries, Parliament can fund a BSL interpreter to facilitate that. In response, the manager of Deaflink, Heidi Jobling, commented:

"We are really pleased that Catherine has taken this positive step towards including the BSL communities. It is so difficult for BSL users to access any type of service and to have our local MP leading the way sends out a clear message, not only to the BSL community but to other providers and organisations, that being accessible is important."

But this is not about ticking a box and moving on. I hope it is a clear demonstration of my determination to improve accessibility for deaf people wherever I can, including through this debate.

To mark Deaf Awareness Week, the chief executive of the National Deaf Children's Society wrote a blog entitled "Unsure How to Communicate With Deaf People? Here's Some Advice". It revealed the findings of her charity's recent survey that more than half of British adults do not feel confident talking to deaf people, while one in five has been nervous when speaking to a deaf person, simply because they do not know what to do. The piece opened with a really powerful description:

"Imagine if you were with a group of friends and one of them said something funny, which you didn't quite catch. Now imagine, while everyone else is laughing, you ask them to repeat it, only to be met with the response 'Oh, it doesn't matter.' What if this happened to you again and again, in lots of different situations? For many deaf people, this is far from hypothetical; it's real life."

That scenario is bad enough in social situations, but the constant inability to communicate or be communicated with in one's own language—and therefore access timely, appropriate and important healthcare, support or information—is particularly serious, as it can be a matter of life or death.

My constituent Ellen O'Sullivan, who is deaf, recently contacted me about the tragic death of a young man from Essex, who ended his life last month. It is reported that, having been assessed as having severe mental

health problems and requiring urgent attention, the man was referred to mainstream counselling with the provision of a BSL interpreter, instead of the specialist deaf-focused therapy requested by his GP. Following his death, the specialist counselling service Deaf4Deaf set up a crowdfunding page to establish the Daniel MJ Webster Deaf Mental Health fund, with a target of raising £50,000 to provide six emergency counselling sessions to 278 deaf people with severe mental ill health in the parts of England where the NHS does not fund that. Such support is vital because, as the crowdfunding page highlights:

"The NHS regions who do not offer BSL counsellors use an interpreter with a counsellor. In general hearing counsellors do not understand the specific issues faced by Deaf people.

Interpreted counselling involves a counsellor and interpreter in the room with the Deaf person as they talk about deeply personal issues. Many Deaf people give up after a few sessions because communication becomes difficult.

There is an increasing number of Deaf people asking for NHS funded Deaf focused counselling, they report suicidal thoughts. Many of these people have tried interpreted counselling which was not suitable for them."

The establishment of this fund in Daniel MJ Webster's memory is extremely powerful, and it is highly relevant that I raise his case during Mental Health Awareness Week. Does the Minister seriously think it is acceptable that the crowdfunding campaign should have to take place?

On being informed that I had secured this debate, my constituent Ellen O'Sullivan took the trouble to share her wider concerns about access to NHS services for BSL users and to canvass the views of many of her deaf friends. I will share some of their experiences. One commented:

"I am trying to be independent but I am unable to do that because to make an appointment you have to ring up, which obviously I can't do because I am deaf. So, I have to rely on my mother to ring them or make or cancel the appointment. The doctors do have a website to book an appointment online, but when I need to see a doctor as an emergency on the day, I can't book an appointment online because the appointments are not available to book until after a week or two.

I do understand that the NHS are trying to save money but as a deaf person I think it is important that doctors and hospitals book an interpreter to be with a patient the whole time while they're at hospital or the doctors, in case something happens. For example, my partner who is also deaf, had a nose operation. It was a day operation and the hospital only booked an interpreter for 2 hours, but he also needs an interpreter when he wakes up, so he knows what is happening."

Another explained:

"I am sick of going to the doctor to make an appointment and when they send letters regarding the appointment and the dates I can't make due to work, I have to get my Mam to ring them and rearrange the time or cancel. I would rather email or text because I hate bothering her to ring up all the time."

Another of Ellen's friends commented:

"I don't want to ask my Mam to make an appointment when I'm 30, I would like to be independent now. We need an app for quick easy access to book GP appointments."

Another stated:

"I was in hospital for an operation and when I woke up the nurse came up to me and was talking to me, so I told her I was deaf but she was still talking to me! The staff gave me paper and pencil after my operation but I couldn't write because I was hooked up to drips. I need an interpreter with me all the time!"

[Catherine McKinnell]

Other concerns raised by Ellen and her friends include the use of BSL interpreters who are not fully qualified, and the constant stress and anxiety that deaf people feel before and during medical appointments because they do not know whether their communication needs will be met.

John Howell: The hon. Lady is making an excellent case. I wonder whether she is aware of a number of NHS trusts that have tried to get around the problem, initially at least, by having television screens showing a BSL interpreter who helps the patient to get their appointment. That is a very good start, but it illustrates her point that it is only the start, because the person needs to be there throughout the whole process. Is the hon. Lady aware of that experiment?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that I was about to make. I said that an app should be available for contacting a doctor's surgery—I think most doctor's surgeries would agree. We need to explore the use of technology to make accessing NHS services a reality for deaf people—texts, apps, Skype or FaceTime—and urgently to invest much more in making sure that where there are technological solutions, we harness them to their greatest effect as soon as possible. All NHS staff, whether administrative or medical, need to understand deaf people's communication needs and NHS buildings must be accessible, with clear plain English signage. Those issues are reflected in the experience of many deaf people in my region.

The Newcastle-based charity Deaflink North East shared the recent outcomes of work that it is undertaking on behalf of Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust to identify the issues and barriers that BSL users face, which Deaflink states are common right across the country. They include deaf people regularly being told to telephone to book a BSL interpreter; continually having to remind GPs and hospitals that they need a BSL interpreter and it not being clear whose responsibility it is to book one, despite their communication needs repeatedly being flagged; appointments not being long enough for BSL interpretation; interpreters not having appointments and people being sent home after waiting for a very long time; being asked to sign forms without fully understanding what they mean; being sent large amounts of complex pre and post-operation information, with only telephone numbers provided if they require further advice; staff being generally unaware about deaf people's communication needs, such as that they need to look up when speaking or should not shout out a deaf person's name when they are waiting in reception; and deaf people simply not understanding what treatment they are receiving and having no means of finding out, and the likelihood that they are, therefore, being treated without informed consent.

Those communication issues clearly become more frightening in an emergency situation. Last year, deaf blogger Liam O'Dell highlighted concerning findings from freedom of information requests he had made to hospital and ambulance trusts about the BSL interpretation services they provide—or, rather, often do not provide. His article opened:

“Distressed, in pain, in an unfamiliar environment with no means to communicate.

It's a feeling of isolation one would usually associate with your typical horror movie, but if the right provisions aren't in place, it can be a real-life nightmare for the 50,000 deaf people in the UK that use British Sign Language as their first language.”

Of course, this issue is by no means restricted to NHS services. The Minister may be aware that, in September last year, I wrote to the Minister for Disabled People after being contacted by Deaflink, which was due to lose its core funding from the Newcastle Gateshead clinical commissioning group in what appears to have been a cost-saving measure. I wrote to the Minister for Disabled People because I felt the wide-ranging concerns Deaflink had raised should be addressed by the Department with overall responsibility for cross-Government disability issues: the Department for Work and Pensions. However, my letter was transferred to the Department of Health and Social Care and then seemingly got lost. I received a response from the Minister in January. That again begs the question of which Department has specific responsibility for promoting BSL and standing up for its users. If the Minister is unable to provide an answer today, I suggest that the Government need urgently to resolve that.

Deaflink's manager, Heidi Jobling, told me that after more than a decade of working with BSL communities in the north-east, she has seen

“the statutory services available to BSL users getting progressively worse. There are always exceptions, but it is widely acknowledged that, when leaving school, the average reading age of a BSL user is 8-9 years old. The majority of the hearing world do not understand that many BSL users do not feel comfortable or able to communicate in written English. Lip reading is difficult, exhausting and at best about 50% accurate. Yet, these are the fall back communication methods when no interpreter is present.”

She went on to ask how BSL users are supposed to access public health information about things such as joining a gym, stopping smoking, joining a weight loss group, safe amounts of alcohol or preventing diabetes—or, indeed, about how BSL users can access the benefits system, which now is almost entirely online. I dealt with a case in which a leading high street optician did not provide or fund a BSL interpreter for a deaf constituent, believing that offering a double-length appointment and speaking more slowly would be sufficient.

The letter I received from Deaflink highlighted serious concerns about the impact of almost a decade of austerity on BSL users. For example, the adult services sensory team has closed, all BSL-using social workers have been removed, and support to the majority of BSL users has been withdrawn following punitive local authority funding cuts. Heidi Jobling concluded:

“I am writing because I am concerned that, in times of austerity, the needs of the BSL community are the easiest to overlook.”

I find that statement deeply depressing.

I am, of course, acutely aware that the enormous challenges BSL users face in accessing what most people would consider to be everyday services are not restricted to the public sector. Indeed, the Treasury Committee, of which I am a member, highlighted only this week the difficulties that far too many people with accessibility requirements face in engaging with financial institutions and services. That certainly includes BSL users. One of the recommendations we made in our report was that the Equality and Human Rights Commission needs more resources to enforce the Equality Act 2010.

That brings me to my final concern. In response to the concerns I raised on behalf of Deaflink, the Minister emphasised:

“NHS organisations should provide interpretation services to all patients requiring them, including users of BSL. Providing communication support to service users is driven by the requirement to comply with relevant legislation, including the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998, and supporting guidance. This makes it imperative for organisations to provide language and communications support to ensure that patients are able to communicate effectively and appropriately with clinicians and other health service professionals.”

She went on to highlight that

“non-compliant organisations risk complaints and legal challenges, as well as patient safety and other implications.”

Given all the concerns I have highlighted, does the Minister really think the current legislation is sufficient to ensure that BSL users have their communication needs met across the NHS, or will she consider introducing a BSL Act along the lines of the one in Scotland? Given the difficulties that BSL users have in accessing many NHS services in the first place, just how easy does she think it would be for them to make a complaint about those services or to find out anything about the complaints process?

The fact that Deaflink is undertaking the work I mentioned with the Northumbria Healthcare NHS Trust and, to a lesser extent, the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Trust is really positive. Is the Minister confident that all NHS services are taking steps to conduct and then act on similar work, or will she ask NHS England to properly investigate the level of deaf awareness in those services and their accessibility for BSL users? I make a gentle plea to her not to make reference to induction loops or technology for hearing loss. Although those things are extremely important, this debate is about accessibility to NHS services for BSL users specifically.

In conclusion, does the Minister really think it is appropriate to expect adult BSL users to have continually to rely on friends and family—often their parents—to access healthcare and treatment or to discuss private medical information? Is it really acceptable for BSL users to have continually to challenge, demand and fight for access to NHS services that most of us take for granted, or to face delays to their treatment because their communication needs simply have not been recognised and met? That is not a situation that any of us would tolerate, so why on earth should deaf people have to do so in 2019, almost a decade after the Equality Act became law?

2.57 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ryan. I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). I congratulate her on securing this important debate and commend her both for her role as a champion for deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens and for her excellent opening speech. I also thank the House authorities and technicians, and the interpreters—the signers—for their ongoing efforts to ensure that our proceedings are accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Having spoken recently to senior members of staff, I know that a number of initiatives are being explored, and I look forward to some really positive news very soon.

I am grateful to Action on Hearing Loss for its briefing, and to SignHealth. Action on Hearing Loss offers some top tips for GPs to improve access, such as

providing a range of methods for people who are deaf to contact the surgery, providing deaf awareness training for practice staff, and ensuring that people who have hearing loss leave feedback about the quality of their care. It lists troubling statistics about the experience of deaf people at their local health centres. Some 57% of people who are deaf said they felt unclear about their health advice because a sign language interpreter was unavailable for their appointment. Only one in 10 deaf people surveyed had been asked about their communication needs, and two fifths said that staff at their GP surgery still call their name out when it is their turn to be seen. Those numbers indicate a serious lack of attention to deaf people's needs. You probably know, Ms Ryan, that NHS England has set out an accessible information standard—a clear approach for improving the accessibility of NHS and adult social care services for people with disabilities and sensory loss. Will the Minister comment on how the standard could be better enforced among GP practices in England?

Other recommendations made by Action on Hearing Loss include: introducing loop systems in all GP surgeries; making BSL interpreters available, and allowing for extended appointments when they are needed; and making sure that staff have a good knowledge of the communication needs of people who are deaf or have hearing loss by annotating their medical records and files appropriately.

Action on Hearing Loss quotes from a recent NHS England study, which found that

“deaf people's health is poorer than that of the general population, with probable under diagnosis and under treatment of chronic conditions putting them at risk of preventable ill health.”

When it comes to mental health, the picture for deaf people is not encouraging. SignHealth reports that deaf people experience significant difficulty in accessing mental health services. Deaf people are twice as likely to experience mental health problems, but their access to help in British Sign Language is extremely poor or non-existent. Deaf people continue to suffer from mental ill health in disproportionate numbers and, sadly, suicide is becoming more of a concern. SignHealth reports that several high-profile deaf men have died by suicide in the past few weeks. Clearly, deaf access to NHS services is a life-or-death issue that needs to be treated with the utmost urgency.

In conclusion, easily solvable problems continue to inhibit deaf people from accessing health care. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North pointed out, when deaf people want to see their GP, many have to walk to their surgery to make an appointment because there is often no other way for them to do so. When deaf people see their doctor, 80% want to use sign language but only 30% are given the chance to do so. Of the deaf people surveyed, 70% had not been to their GP recently although they had wanted to go, mainly because no interpreter was offered.

On behalf of Action on Hearing Loss and SignHealth, and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, I will ask the Minister some questions. It is the first chance I have had to welcome her to her place; I wish her well in all her endeavours. Will the Department for Health and Social Care commit to monitoring performance against the accessible information standard? Will the Department publish performance results? Will the Department commit to providing funding to help with the standards requirements? Finally, will the Minister

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

make representations to the Minister for Disabled People about looking again at the steps that can be taken to improve the market for BSL interpretation?

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today and to help to represent the views of the deaf community. I hope the Minister can agree to their requests, and that we will start to see a positive change in the physical and mental health of deaf people in England. I look forward to the responses from the Front-Bench spokespeople, especially from the Minister.

3.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), and I give special thanks to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for her passionate contribution on behalf of those who use British Sign Language. I commend her for the steps she has taken in her constituency.

I must be honest and say that I do not know much about British Sign Language. The staff in my office are aware of it and we try to have someone available for people to communicate with in BSL, should they wish to; it is important that we as elected representatives provide that opportunity. While I do not have the ability, some of my staff have made it their business to be able to communicate with those who use BSL.

I am happy that my two granddaughters have both learned sign language—in a rudimentary way; not in totality—at school. They can sign their names, which is a small way of moving forward, among other things we can do. I will ask the Minister a question along those lines, but first let me say that I am pleased to see her in her place. She seems to be enjoying her new role, and we are pleased to see her there. The difference between my grandchildren and me highlights the need for young people to have basic skills to enable them to communicate with people who may need their help. It is important that our children have an opportunity to do that at an early stage.

Although we must take steps to address the interpreter system within the NHS, as mentioned by the hon. Members for Poplar and Limehouse and for Newcastle upon Tyne North, I sincerely believe that we also need to make BSL a staple of education, so that every child has a rudimentary understanding of sign language by the time they leave school. I know the Minister is not responsible for education—her role is big enough as it is—but will she communicate with the Department for Education and find out how that can be achieved? It is so important. Our children are often criticised for anti-social behaviour, but I believe our young people are a marvellous example of what the future can hold. Such small steps enable them to have compassion for other people. My boys were always interested in other people, and I am encouraged to know that my grandchildren are the same. If the new generation has an interest in others, that means a whole lot.

The media in Northern Ireland last year highlighted the case of a deaf lady who was going through treatment for cancer, but who did not have an allocated interpreter for any of her appointments. I was shocked by the lack of signers available to NHS trusts in Northern Ireland. An article in the *Belfast Telegraph* outlined the issue

and quoted Ann Owens from the charity Hands that Talk—a lovely name that sums up sign language. She spoke about the lack of signers available for short-notice requests:

“It can be difficult as you can need about two to three weeks’ notice sometimes, but if it’s an emergency there can be times when someone’s not available due to the shortage, including for A&E admissions.”

That is a critical point at which to have interpreters in place. She went on:

“There’s about 25 to 28 British Sign Language interpreters in Northern Ireland and only three Irish Sign Language interpreters, which would mainly be used in the Enniskillen area.”

That illustrates the issue that we want to highlight, and it shows the dearth of interpreters. We need to address that by recruiting more people who can give up their time, and who are paid to be available at short notice. Each trust must have a list of interpreters who can be available at short notice to step into A&E situations. Other Members have referred to this, but it is important to take steps to address the matter where it is at its most critical, which is usually in A&E or on the ward.

I do not want to be critical of nurses—that is not the purpose of this debate—but we need nurses who can communicate in sign language with those who require it. Last year, I was in hospital on three occasions, and I was asked to sign a document to give consent. Truthfully, I was in so much pain that I would have signed away my land and farm; just imagine what it would have been like if I could not understand what I was being told to do, because I was deaf. How difficult would it be for a deaf patient, lying in absolute agony, to be asked to sign something that they did not understand? That shows me how frightening it is for deaf people, and how important it is to have the right people in the right place at the right time.

When foreign nationals go to A&E, interpreters are sourced and money is paid out—rightly so; I support that 100%—and yet our own British deaf people are left out in the cold because of the lack of interpreters. It is not good enough to say that we do not have the signers. We know there is a problem, so let us train staff within the NHS to do the job. The hon. Members for Newcastle upon Tyne North and for Poplar and Limehouse have referred to that, and I think others who speak will do the same. Let us put funding and courses in place to teach signing, to ensure that there is always someone on site who has at least a basic understanding of BSL. It is important to have someone with even a rudimentary knowledge of sign language to communicate. We know there is a problem, we have acknowledged our responsibility and now we must address it.

Although there are 11 million people with hearing loss in the United Kingdom, new research has revealed that a staggering 94% of Brits—I am one of them—know no more than two words of British Sign Language. That really has to change. We have to be more open and more capable of responding, especially in our Government Departments and most especially within the NHS. It is so important to address the issue in the NHS. I look forward to the plan of action to fund and recruit the necessary staff to do what is right for the deaf in our community. I look forward to the contributions of the shadow Ministers from the Scottish National party and the Labour party, but I especially look forward to the Minister’s response. We are very impressed by her so far, and there is no pressure on her.

3.11 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing this debate today following national Deaf Awareness Week. Her initiatives in Newcastle are very worthy; she clearly cares passionately. I add my congratulations to the thought given in having BSL interpreters and signers here today. That was really good thinking. As always, it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and other Members who have spoken today.

Every day, people with hearing loss get on with work and family life while dealing with all the challenges that that brings. It is difficult to imagine what it is like to cope with a job using public transport, as well as coping with shopping and meeting your child's teacher, when basic communication, which the rest of us take for granted, does not come easily. Almost 9 million citizens in the UK, including 50,000 children and 758,000 people in Scotland, have some degree of hearing loss, as have I. At least 24,000 use British Sign Language as their main form of communication. They are a large and important part of our community, and they need us to be more aware.

Access to NHS services is an important improvement that we can make to the lives of those in our deaf community. To support people who use British Sign Language, as mentioned earlier, NHS Scotland has created information in BSL for a range of health topics, including accessing NHS services in Scotland.

Scotland was the first country in the UK to legislate for BSL to achieve legal status. The British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015, passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament, promotes the use of British Sign Language and made provision for the preparation and publication of the British Sign Language national plan for Scotland, which we now have. The BSL national plan sets out 70 actions that Ministers will take to improve the lives of people who use sign language, backed by £1.3 million of public funding.

Under the plan, BSL users will have access to the information and services that they need to live active, healthy lives and to make informed choices at every stage of their lives. The national plan's health, mental health and wellbeing actions include, among other things, publishing a schedule for making all screening and immunisation information accessible in BSL; increasing the availability of accurate and relevant health and social care information in BSL; developing a learning resource for health and social care staff to raise awareness of sign language and deaf culture; and working with partners to deliver and evaluate two training programmes aimed at supporting BSL English interpreters to work within the health sector, with a view to informing a longer-term approach.

NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has appointed a health improvement practitioner to support mental health in the deaf community, which will help raise mental health awareness and empower that community, allowing them better access to services. In the wider community within my own Falkirk constituency, I have surgeries every month at a wonderful place called the Forth Valley Sensory Centre, which is run by volunteers. I can

recommend its coffee and square sausage. People with hearing loss are welcome to come along. Everyone is welcome, by the way, if they like square sausage.

Catherine McKinnell: The Minister is not familiar with the concept of square sausage.

John Mc Nally: Many people are not familiar with the concept of square sausage. I tried to introduce it some time ago when I first came down here; it was refused by the catering staff, but I shall redouble my efforts.

The centre is a place where people with hearing loss or visual difficulties can access quality services, advice and equipment that helps them to be as independent as possible. Practical support is there for the deaf community at all stages in their lives. In fact, my mother-in-law, Mrs Chalmers, and my own mother, Rosa, made use of the services in the not-too-distant past. Young people looking for work can access advice on job seeking and training. It is also a thriving social hub, holding a range of activities and giving folk a chance to chat, try new skills and have fun. It was the first of its kind in the UK and has proven to be an absolutely invaluable resource to the community.

As with all language skills, it is good to teach communication to the young. We see successful examples in some children's television programmes, using a system of signs and symbols called Makaton. It is picked up by all young viewers, not just the deaf community. The more who know some of the skills, the better. It helps us talk to each other at the earliest stages.

I want to draw attention to the inspiring "I'd like to teach the world to sign", an initiative known as Hands of the World, co-ordinated by the remarkable Sharon Tonner-Saunders of the University of Dundee. She brings music and sign language together across the globe. Some 40 countries are participating. It is a great example of horizontal communication integration, and I ask everyone to Google it and have a look.

The Scottish Government have a plan for primary schools called the 1+2 language plan, which requires every child of primary school age to have experience of their native language, whatever it may be, and of two additional languages—they could be French, Mandarin or British Sign Language. The Scottish Qualifications Authority qualification in BSL is being developed and SCQF levels 5 and 6 will be available from autumn 2019. The UK Government have not yet committed to introducing a GCSE BSL qualification. Rather, they will consider introducing one before 2022, but we hope that action will be taken sooner.

We want to make Scotland the best place in the world for BSL users to live, work and visit. A start has been made, but the efforts must continue. I hope the same thing happens here in Westminster, so let us keep talking—and, of course, signing.

3.18 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Thank you, Ms Ryan, for your chairmanship of today's important debate on an essential issue for our times. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for securing this debate and for her passionate speech and obvious commitment to acting on behalf of her own constituents and deaf people everywhere. She has inspired me to audit the provision in my constituency

[Julie Cooper]

to see what I can do to make things easier for the deaf. I want to say how pleased I am to see Parliament facilitating sign language and subtitles here today. I spoke to the Minister ahead of the debate and we agreed that it would be wonderful if such provision could be made available in every debate in this place.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I alluded to the fact that a lot of progress has been made behind the scenes. The authorities are working very hard to see whether provision can be made, as it is in other Parliaments around the world. The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority gives financial support for tuition for MPs who want to learn BSL, so perhaps we can make colleagues more aware that that facility is available also.

Julie Cooper: That information is helpful. I am sure that a number of Members would like to take advantage of that and learn more, and perhaps make a commitment to becoming signers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) reminded us, two thirds of people with hearing loss have left their GP surgery feeling unclear about the health advice that has been provided. The scale of the problem is that there are 11 million people living with hearing loss. That is one in six of the population. The charity Action on Hearing Loss estimates that by 2035 15.6 million people will have some sort of impairment. It is time we took that seriously and focused our attention on solutions. It beggars belief that 40% of deaf people say that staff at their medical healthcare provider have called out their name to announce that it was their turn to be seen by a healthcare professional. It is hard to believe, but it happens all the time.

We have also heard about difficulty in making telephone applications. The Secretary of State is focusing on technology, and perhaps he might want to look at the request for an app to make emergency appointments for a deaf person. The Minister could advise him about it. Other issues include the fact that in trying to communicate on the telephone there is obviously no one to sign, and no opportunity to lip read. There can sometimes be difficulties with reading documents, because often when someone's first language is sign language they fall behind with their reading level, which adds to the difficulties.

Those communication barriers mean that many people rely on friends and family members when navigating NHS services. We have heard about the challenges that someone experiencing hearing loss or deafness has in dealing with life in general, but none can be more important than those arising over health matters. When deaf people are forced to rely on family members, their independence is clearly compromised. Their confidence is undermined and their right to confidentiality is taken away. It is estimated that communication difficulties experienced by people with hearing loss cost the NHS an extra £76 million a year in additional, unnecessary GP visits. Those barriers may also deter some patients from seeking medical advice and attention, which could lead to their having more serious conditions and more expensive treatments—so the situation is not cost-effective, either.

Last year there was a BBC broadcast showing some distressing experiences of deaf people who were undergoing complex medical treatments for serious conditions, with no

one to explain properly what was happening. The reporter concluded that deaf people were being left behind by the NHS and described a moving scene in which a patient undergoing complex investigations in connection with cancer treatment was absolutely terrified. There was no one there for them to talk to, although they felt extremely unwell and totally frightened. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) touched on that very point, which is a powerful one, about empathising—putting ourselves in the place of a deaf person and thinking what it might be like for them, given that such procedures can be frightening even when we are able to ask “What is that for?”, “How long will this go on?” and “What happens next?”

The issue could easily be addressed by the provision of trained interpreters with a full working knowledge of British Sign Language. BSL is a visual-gestural language that is the first or preferred language of many deaf people and has its own grammar and principles, which differ from English. The provision of British Sign Language interpreters would surely facilitate a kinder, more efficient, more cost-effective service. Members have mentioned that where such a service is provided it is done in a limited fashion. Someone who is in for five hours of medical treatment will be given an interpreter for only two; or the interpreter will not be there when they awaken after an anaesthetic. Clearly that is not good enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse talked about the mental health issues that deaf people face disproportionately. Is it any wonder, given the isolation forced on them?

The whole issue relies on the recognition that for many deaf people sign language is their first language. English is often their second language, so providing a British Sign Language interpreter is as important as providing an interpreter for a speaker of a foreign language. Surely the Government must recognise that access to a BSL interpreter should be not an optional extra but a fundamental right. More than that, not only is the lack of qualified British Sign Language interpreters discriminatory; it is putting the health and, in some cases, the lives of deaf people at risk.

Those who suffer with deafness or hearing impairment have a legal right to support. Since August 2016 all organisations that provide NHS care and/or publicly funded adult social care have been legally required to follow the accessible information standard. The standard sets out a specific, consistent approach to identifying, recording, flagging, sharing and meeting the information and communication support needs of patients with a disability, impairment or sensory loss. In addition, the Equality Act 2010—landmark legislation introduced by the last Labour Government—made provision for equality in all public services and made a specific demand for service providers to make reasonable adjustment to avoid substantial disadvantage. Offering the services of an interpreter is cited as an example. The failure to provide support and British Sign Language interpreters is not just undesirable: it is a breach of the law.

We understand that the Minister who is responding to the debate cannot tackle all the issues on her own, but if she has been as moved as the rest of us by some of the speeches we have heard, we ask her to offer a lead. We want her to liaise with her colleagues in the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, and to talk to the Minister for Disabled People, Health

and Work about taking the issue forward to ensure that the communication needs of all those who are deaf or who have some hearing loss are assessed and that, where necessary, a qualified BSL interpreter is always available.

Will the Minister demonstrate today that she understands the problem, which amounts to discrimination on the basis of disability? Will she listen, as I did, to the examples of good practice from Scotland, Finland, New Zealand and Hungary? If they can get it right, I am sure it is not beyond us to take some action.

3.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I will begin with the observation that I was wondering how to include square sausage in my speech. I do not think it will fit in anywhere, but I am very much looking forward to speaking to the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) and finding out more.

I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for securing the time for this important debate. I know that she has wanted to raise the matter for some time. As last week was Deaf Awareness Week, the debate could not be more timely. What a pleasure it is that we have two interpreters here today; we welcome them. I know that Mr Speaker is committed to making Parliament accessible to all. It was great to see that one of the senior Clerks was present just now. Let us hope that she takes what was happening back to the Speaker. I am sure that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), and I can speak to the House authorities about the possibility of a pilot in Westminster Hall. We have discussed whether we might ask even a team of interpreters to interpret busy sittings in the main Chamber—I do not think that some interventions deserve interpretation anyway, but this is an important issue, and it is wonderful that we have subtitling and interpreters here today.

Ensuring fair and equitable access to public services, including but not limited to the NHS, is of critical importance to disabled people. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North for all the efforts that she has made in her constituency to use BSL to be more accessible to her constituents. I will definitely reflect on that with my team. I also want to thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for his careful stewardship of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, and for the group's work. It has done a lot of work to raise awareness and improve the way that we support people with hearing loss or deafness.

I shall attempt to answer several points raised by hon. Members, but I hope they will bear with me if I do not answer them all, in which case I will write to them. I am afraid there was nothing on the Department's website about Deaf Awareness Week, but if I am still in post next year, I and the Minister for Care, who was due to respond to this debate, will ensure that that is no longer the case. NHS England highlighted Deaf Awareness Week on social media, including advice on how the NHS can help the one in six people who are estimated to have hearing loss. On Twitter, the NHS Business Services Authority published a video highlighting how its technology team have been learning BSL to support deaf colleagues.

The Government consider that current legislation is sufficient—I will speak more about that issue—but the challenges raised by hon. Members today mean that I will look carefully at what more we can do to communicate obligations under existing legislation to individual NHS trusts. The issue of BSL as a language is probably a matter for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport rather than the Department of Health and Social Care, but all Departments have a responsibility to create inclusive communities. I will take away the comments made by hon. Members and discuss them with ministerial colleagues in other Departments.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North brought up a distressing example of the gentleman in Essex, and mentioned issues of deafness and mental health—of course, we are thinking about mental health this week. The Government are committed to that issue, and addressing mental health is at the heart of the long-term plan. We are investing £2 billion over five years to improve mental health services, and NHS England commissioned specialist mental health services for deaf people, including in-patient and outreach services. The hon. Lady and the shadow Minister asked me to ask NHS England to look at health services for deaf people, and I am happy to raise those points and look at what the Care Quality Commission is doing. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse set me several challenges, and I will attempt to address the performance results later in my remarks. If I do not, I will be happy to talk to him after this debate or hold a meeting, and I would also be happy to speak to the Minister for Disabled People.

I was asked how we can help more people to know about British Sign Language—indeed, the hon. Gentleman mentioned that his grandchildren are learning it at school. The Department for Education has confirmed that it will begin working with experts to develop subject content for a British Sign Language GCSE, and that will be assessed against the rigorous subject content criteria that apply to all GCSEs. Ofqual will also need to consider the proposal against its assessment criteria. Schools have asked for a period of stability to provide them with a chance to embed the extensive reforms to GCSEs and A-levels, and in March last year, the Education Secretary confirmed that the Government will not introduce further reforms to GCSEs or A-levels beyond those committed to during this Parliament. However, if a British Sign Language GCSE can be developed in line with GCSE requirements, the Government will consider making an exception to their rule on stability, and introducing it this Parliament, and I hope hon. Members will be encouraged by that.

As hon. Members have said, British Sign Language is the primary form of communication for many deaf people and fundamental to the way that they communicate with their families and loved ones. I thank everybody—interpreters, teachers and users of BSL—for their work, which helps people with hearing impairments to lead fulfilling lives in our communities. About 24,000 people in the country have BSL as their first language, and it is essential that they can communicate with NHS staff and services to access the best possible healthcare.

This Government are committed to a truly world-class health service that must be equally available to all. People must be able to communicate their needs and access the information, advice and support that they

[Seema Kennedy]

need to complement the hands-on work of health professionals. Some people may need additional support or to be supported in a different way. We must take proactive steps to provide support for reasonable adjustments—hon. Members highlighted examples of where that is perhaps not happening, and I will take note of that.

Let me focus on the robust framework that we have in place to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to permit access to NHS services for those with hearing impairments and those who use BSL. Existing equality legislation means that employers, service providers and public bodies must provide services in BSL when it is reasonable for them to do so. That was underpinned by the Equality Act 2010, which places a duty on all public bodies to make reasonable adjustments so that disabled people are not put at a disadvantage compared with those who live without a disability. Commissioners of NHS services must pay due regard to the needs of their population, including those living with a disability, when planning and commissioning services.

Service providers must consider what disabled people who use their services might need and make reasonable adjustments accordingly. That includes, where appropriate, access to BSL services. The Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) Regulations 2014 further expand on how the NHS should implement the Equality Act and make reasonable adjustments. Such provisions help to ensure that people are treated at all times with the dignity and respect that they deserve. A key part of that is the accessible information standard, which is essential for an effective high-quality health service. It was introduced in 2015 and clarifies what health and care services must do under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments so that people with additional communication needs are not put at a disadvantage.

All organisations that provide NHS care or publicly funded adult social care are required to comply with the accessible information standard, which sets out how patients and service users—including carers, where appropriate—should receive information in a way that is accessible to them. The Care Quality Commission, which monitors how the standard is put into place, specifically highlights that that includes users of British Sign Language. One wonderful example of that is the fact that BSL users can use the NHS 111 BSL language service, which provides telephone advice on when to seek further medical help, advises on medication use and provides tips on self-care. BSL users can download an app that enables them to connect to an interpreter via a webcam, and the interpreter then relays the conversation to the 111 adviser. Such technology is a great passion of the Secretary of State, and I will take away the comments that have been raised about that during the debate.

For standards and duties to be effective, compliance must be monitored and action taken where needed. When it inspects a service, the CQC uses five steps to identify whether it is complying with the accessible information standard to ensure that people with disabilities can access health and care services. Those five steps focus on how services identify and assess needs and how they are planned, how services clearly record identified needs, what steps are in place as part of the assessment and care planning service, and how services flag information and communication needs and their records, given that

the method used must make it possible for all staff to be quickly made aware of and work to meet those needs. Finally, the CQC assesses whether services meet an individual's needs, ensuring that people receive information in a way that they understand. That might mean arranging communication support if people need it, and it could include access to a BSL interpreter or lip reader, or using a hearing aid.

Organisations are required to publish an accessible communications policy and establish a complaints process. It is important that organisations support users to provide feedback and help to improve those services. In 2017, NHS England led a post-implementation review of the accessible information standard, which provided an invaluable opportunity to assess its impact and ensure that it remains fit for purpose. Following the review, a revised specification was issued. Although there were no substantive amendments, there were changes to the definition of some terms, and clarification of requirements regarding the Mental Capacity Act 2005 and data sharing. The review showed that there was widespread support for the aims of the standard and that patients and carers were clear that receiving accessible information is essential if they are to receive high-quality, safe care.

More generally, there is an action plan on hearing loss, which sets out key objectives including prevention, early diagnosis, maximising independence—a point the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North made—and enabling people to take part in everyday activities, such as gaining access to work. There is already a commissioning framework published as part of the action plan, and a joint strategic needs assessment for local authorities and NHS commissioners is expected this summer.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published “Hearing loss in adults: assessment and management” in June 2018, which will form the basis of developing a quality standard for adult onset hearing loss that clinical commissioning groups can use to support commissioning. The action plan on hearing loss consortium is led by NHS England, which works with stakeholders across a system to tackle this important issue and galvanise action, given the rising prevalence of hearing loss.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I commend the framework document and the action plan published last year; the Department of Health got a lot of plaudits for putting in place a plan to ensure that that which everyone has been raising is delivered on the ground. I would be very grateful for reports on how well the Department is doing, on cross-government support, and on progress in the NHS, because what is on paper is very good and got huge support from the deaf and hard-of-hearing community last year.

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. Once plans are put in place, it is important that we monitor them, assess them and review them. I am happy to ensure that the Department keeps lines of communication open with the hon. Gentleman and his group on this matter.

I hope that I have provided some reassurance that there is a robust legislative framework, standards that enact it and a monitoring regime in place. This debate has highlighted where we can sponsor greater responsiveness—I appreciate the important point that the hon. Gentleman

in particular made about the market for interpreters. I take these concerns very seriously and I am committed to communicating with colleagues across Government. I will finish by thanking the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North for highlighting such an important issue.

3.42 pm

Catherine McKinnell: I must begin by apologising for the fact that, in my enthusiasm to set out this debate at the beginning, I did not welcome the Minister to her new post or acknowledge that she has stepped in to this debate at short notice. It is often the way in Parliament, when two issues come up in two different places at the same time. I thank her for her response today.

I also thank everyone who has contributed to the debate, which has been incredibly constructive. It has highlighted that there is some good practice, but still an awful lot of work to do. I know that much of that work is taking place within the all-party parliamentary group, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on the tireless work that he and his group do on this matter.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his positive contribution to the debate and the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson, who managed to get a reference to Lorne sausage into his remarkable contribution. I studied in Edinburgh, so I am very familiar with the square sausage concept.

In all seriousness, while the Minister has given some positive feedback, there is still a question about who in Government is responsible for this matter. Who is the champion within Government? Who will take this on? I have no doubt about the Minister's sincerity in taking on the points raised in this debate, but it would be good to know who has responsibility in Government for

delivering on this, and I would be grateful if we could get a clear answer to that from the Government in response to this debate.

I must also raise a concern with one of the statistics that the Minister used in her response. She referred to there being 24,000 people who have British Sign Language as their first language. That is a disputed figure because it comes from the 2011 census, in which British Sign Language users were not able to properly participate, due to their inability to access the census in the way that those not having British Sign Language as their first language were able to. Their figures for users of British Sign Language are that 50,000 people have it as their first language and that 87,000 people in total use it. I just put that on the record, because it affects a large number of people, not to mention their families and friends and those around them.

As we were talking, I was reminded of another experience that somebody told me about, which has driven a lot of my passion in this area. It was quite a disturbing story: a gentleman went to the hospital with his father as the interpreter for a medical consultation to get the results of some tests. When they received a diagnosis of cancer, the son was so upset by the news that he left the consultation room, because he could not interpret it for his father. That to me is unforgivable. It is not how our NHS services should be. I therefore implore the Minister to do everything she can to champion this issue, both in the Department of Health and Social Care and across Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered access to NHS services for British Sign Language users.

3.46 pm

Sitting suspended.

Licensing in Durham

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered licensing in Durham.

May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher? The Licensing Act 2003 replaced several more complex systems; and at the time, there were good reasons for introducing that legislation. A reduction in time-limited binge drinking and the staggering of leaving times to reduce public disorder were laudable aims, as was the inclusion of consideration of the impact on residents, but it is far from clear that the Act has withstood the test of time. It placed responsibility for licensing with local authorities and introduced four licensing objectives that all applicants must uphold: the protection of children from harm, the promotion of public safety, the prevention of crime and disorder, and the prevention of public nuisance. Licensing authorities were also required to produce a statement of licensing policy outlining their approach to promoting those objectives. However, even when, for a variety of reasons, the objectives are not being promoted by a local authority, the granting of licences seems to continue unabated.

I have been dealing with licensing in my constituency since 2006—just one year after the Act was implemented. I have held many public meetings on this matter, as the policy appears simply to allow more and more venues to open in what is a highly compact residential city as well as an historically important one. I have raised the matter with the council and previous Ministers on numerous occasions, but as one resident recently told me,

“the town just seems saturated with drinking”.

To give a better understanding of the scale of the problem, I should explain that in a very small area in the city centre, there are 11 establishments open until 2 am, two to 2.30 am and four to 1 am, with a further 14 between 12 am and later. However, the new norm is 2 am, as the new developments that are planned for the city centre—the Riverwalk, which has almost been delivered, and Milburngate—despite not being open yet, have been granted licences to 2 am. There are constant applications for extensions to 4 am, and we are all questioning how long it will be before some of those are granted.

Durham County Council recently consulted on its statement of licensing policy, so I held another public meeting, in March this year, as it is obvious that the problem is getting worse. It became clear during the consultation with residents that the existing policy does not uphold the four licensing objectives. The policy rightly states that licensed premises may become a source of public nuisance, generating crime and disorder problems if they are not properly managed. It even acknowledges existing issues of crime and disorder by stating that evidence suggests that late-night alcohol-related crime and antisocial behaviour remains a problem in parts of the county and that the effect that any such disturbance may have is

“a genuine matter to be considered when addressing the hours during which licensable activities may be undertaken.”

The publicly available crime statistics show that in Durham city, the three crimes most linked to alcohol consumption—public order offences, antisocial behaviour and violence—are clustered in two areas: North Road and Walkergate, an area that covers less than half a square kilometre. In fact, nearly 50% of reported crimes between March 2018 and February 2019 took place in those two areas. Both are saturated with bars and clubs that have late licences, and that concentration of recorded crimes is far above that for other town centres in the region.

The local authority’s current policy has simply failed to uphold public safety. In fact, the number of people leaving Walkergate and trying to get home creates such a problem that Durham County Council now closes a city centre street to traffic between 9 pm and 4 am on Friday and Saturday nights. That street is largely residential. How can that be acceptable for people who live or, heaven forbid, are trying to sleep in properties on that street?

Given the large concentration of students living in the city centre, there is a particular issue about how the licensing policy addresses their safety. Investigators are still looking into the tragic death of a student last year. However, we have no idea how, or whether at all, the council’s licensing policy will be changed to incorporate lessons learned from that investigation when it eventually reports.

“Prevention of public nuisance” is a broad term, covering among other things noise, disturbance and litter. It is clear from the feedback that I have received from residents over many years, and my own eyes and ears, that the policy is not working for the city centre. The noise created by people moving around the city in the early hours of the morning is extremely disruptive, and the condition of the marketplace, particularly on a Sunday morning, is horrendous, with large amounts of litter left uncollected and the city appearing dirty and unappealing.

The issue of public nuisance is experienced not just by those living in the immediate city centre, though. As Durham is a small city, many people make their way home on foot. The centre is surrounded by residential areas in all directions, so whichever direction in which people travel, there is disruption and noise for residents.

I do not think that the policy protects children from harm either. One message that I am consistently getting from residents and businesses is that disruption is starting earlier in the day, because of the increased number of stag and hen parties visiting Durham. In fact, Durham’s chamber of trade, in its submission to the council for the licensing review, says:

“The...aggressive, rowdy, noisy and often intimidating behaviour of afternoon binge drinkers in Durham is especially off-putting to vulnerable and younger people, parents...and children, or visitors to the city who are unprepared for the ‘wild west’ environment.”

During my most recent public meeting on this topic, the increase in rowdy behaviour during the day was raised time and again, with residents saying that it was “totally unsuitable for families”, “obscene” and “horrific” and that it often creates quite a hostile and unpleasant atmosphere.

Durham’s policy states:

“Licensing Services works almost exclusively with, through and for people.”

How is it that a policy that clearly states that has allowed Durham to become a place where people feel intimidated? Despite working on this issue for more than 10 years, I am being contacted more and more by residents for whom it is becoming unbearable. During the meeting earlier this year, one resident told me that he had taken to sleeping in the bathroom to get away from the noise. But actually, more and more residents are moving out of the city centre, and in the longer term that will be a disaster for the city. The issue is having an effect not just on residents and visitors, but on businesses. The chamber of trade goes on to say that it is having “a demonstrably negative impact upon city centre trade and employment.”

There is of course the option of adopting a cumulative impact policy to restrict licences. However, that relies on several things, not least the willingness of the licensing authority to expend time and effort in gathering the evidence needed to adopt such a policy. Other local authorities do seem to use that option effectively, though. Cambridge City Council has put five separate such policies in place. In fact, Cambridge’s most recent policy states:

“It is evident from the decrease in crime and incidents that current initiatives”,

through the cumulative impact assessment,

“are effective and are having a positive impact.”

Cheshire West and Chester Council has also taken steps to address this problem, with a cumulative impact policy covering the centre of Chester. In fact, the policy states that

“because of the historic nature of...Chester and its population distribution, applicants for larger entertainment venues may find it easier to meet the requirements...by using areas outside the City Centre.”

However, despite many requests over the years for a specific city centre policy, huge amounts of communication from residents and evidence being submitted to it, Durham County Council has yet to introduce a single cumulative impact policy.

That leads on to my next point, which is the difficulty that residents have in engaging with the licensing system. Government guidance says that one of the aims of the Licensing Act 2003 is to encourage greater community involvement in licensing decisions. However, in Durham people are often simply unaware that such applications are being made until it is far too late to make a representation.

Some local authorities have introduced requirements for stronger community engagement, such as Lambeth Council, which requires applicants to canvass residents’ views before submitting an application, or Newcastle City Council, which allows residents to view the full details of a licensing application and comment online. In Durham, details of an application are available to view only in person, by appointment, and in one location in the whole county. How does that enable people to have a say?

These problems are exacerbated by the increasing use of temporary events notices by venues in the city centre. Existing legislation allows for a venue to apply for up to 15 TENs in a year, which has seen several venues in Durham, particularly in a cluster around Walkergate, open until 4 am. Because there are so many venues in Walkergate, that could mean many TENs in a year, with two or three a week.

What this all adds up to is a small, historic city, with a UNESCO world heritage site right at its centre, that has far too many licensed premises. Durham is not a big city like as Manchester or Birmingham, which can accommodate efforts to boost the evening economy; it is a small residential city and it needs a much better balanced licensing policy.

The statement of licensing policy that applies across a county the size of Durham does not appear to allow for the more detailed approach that is needed to address the specific issues in different communities. How can one licensing policy be adequate for rural towns and villages, as well as for a compact, saturated and busy city centre?

Just before I put some specific questions to the Minister, let me say that I am extremely proud of Durham. It is a beautiful city and I want people to come and enjoy it, whatever their age or background, but I also want residents to be able to enjoy it too. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how we can get a licensing policy that genuinely protects residents by allowing licensing hours to reflect local needs as well as visitor needs, and a licensing policy that does not put developing a night-time economy ahead of the quality of life for local residents.

We need a licensing Act that makes it easier to refuse late licensing hours and one that meets the needs of different communities. That also means reviewing the whole system of TENs and giving local people a greater say over licensing policy, not simply allowing their councillors to take on that role. Instead, there should be more thought about how local communities can have a much greater role in the licensing system, including consideration of how we can get a set of licensing policies in Durham that establishes a balance—allowing, obviously, a limited night-time economy, but also protecting the historic nature of the city and its many residents.

4.13 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher.

I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) on securing this debate. In a previous life, I had the pleasure of being shadowed by her, and I know her to be a person of great integrity who is enormously proud of the City of Durham. If, as she has said, she has worked on this issue as a constituency MP for 10 years, that is because there is clearly an issue in the city. I am sure that she speaks for many of its residents in expressing concern about the impact of the licensing regime on that beautiful place.

The hon. Lady noted, as I do, that in February 2018 the city suffered the tragic death of Olivia Burt, who died outside a club in terrible circumstances, which are the subject of an investigation at the moment. I acknowledge that and place on the record our sympathy with her family and friends following that terrible event.

The hon. Lady is probing the application of the Licensing Act 2003. Given her experience, she knows as well as I do that the system we have set up means that decisions on local licensing policy and how the law is enforced are, quite rightly, matters for local authorities and the police. It does not take too much to read between the lines of her speech and realise that, frankly, her main beef is with Durham County Council rather than with the law as it stands and the actions of the Government.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. At the end of my speech, I should perhaps have made it clear that one of my big asks is for us to try to understand how we can get Durham County Council to change its licensing policy massively during the course of the current review.

Mr Hurd: I think that was clear. I am sure that that message will get through loud and clear to the hon. Lady's constituents, to residents and to the council through the attention that this debate will generate in her local area. The bottom line of her argument is that the current licensing policy does not comply with licensing objectives; she went through those objectives and made that argument. She also referred to other areas. She mentioned Newcastle, Cambridge, Chester and Lambeth, here in London, which are delivering, in her view, a better policy for their residents.

All that confirms my premise: that the problem in this case is not necessarily the law but the application of it. The central issue is the statement of licensing policy, which is now under consultation and review, as is required every five years. This is the moment for changing the policy and the statement, if they need to be changed, so I quite understand why the hon. Lady has brought this matter to the House.

The statement of licensing policy, which all areas are required to have, is a way to ensure that licensing authorities clearly set out their approach. If that requirement is not met, the five-year review gives a wide number of interested parties the opportunity to engage in the process of addressing shortcomings in the policy and contributing to the development of a stronger approach. I have referred to the recent consultation by Durham on its licensing policy, which I believe has now closed. Clearly, this is the opportunity to address some of the issues that have been raised today. As I have said, I am sure that the council will be aware of this debate and will listen to the hon. Lady closely.

The hon. Lady eloquently expressed some of the concerns that exist, not only among residents but in the local chamber of commerce, about the impact on the city centre. Of course she will also be aware that the night-time economy is real, valuable and important for the UK economy, although it is clearly in everyone's interests for the industry to continue to promote responsible drinking and to educate its customers about the risks of alcohol abuse. The licensing system needs to try to strike the right balance between supporting a vibrant night-time economy and protecting the rights of residents and people's quality of life in some of our city centres.

In relation to the Licensing Act 2003, the Government believe that measures to manage the sale and supply of alcohol, supported by strong local governance and accountability, strike the right balance. We do not see any argument for revisiting the Act, and I am not sure that is what the hon. Lady was arguing for. That Act, which is supported by detailed statutory guidance, is clear that the four licensing objectives that she went through must inform all decisions made by the licensing authority. As I said, the measures in place allow the development of vibrant night-time economies while ensuring that licensees give proper consideration to licensing objectives on the prevention of crime and disorder, the prevention of public nuisance, public safety, and the protection of children.

The 2003 Act is clear; we believe it has improved day-to-day co-ordination and co-operation within the various regulatory agencies, and between the regulators and the licensed trade. We believe that its key principles and objectives have endured, as its application in practice has proved capable of evolving and adapting to balance divergent interests. The House of Lords Select Committee that scrutinised the Act and heard evidence about it said that where the Act works, it works very well, so we believe that the measures we have in place can be effective when used appropriately. However, it is the contention of the hon. Lady that Durham County Council is not applying the Act in an appropriate way. As I said, the review and consultation on the statement of licensing policy is the key opportunity to change that.

Dr Blackman-Woods: In general, I am saying that the licensing policy of the county council needs to be massively changed, but there are two areas in which I thought the Minister might be able to help. The first is better guidance on how to ensure local people know about licensing issues and are involved with them, and the second is temporary event notices, which—as other Members have also said to me—seem to have got rather out of control.

Mr Hurd: I will certainly try to address both issues for the hon. Lady.

Late-night opening raises issues, tensions, and competing and sometimes conflicting interests between those who are out for a good time and those who want some peace. The Act abolished set licensing hours, so opening hours are now set locally. When late opening by particular premises leads to problems of crime, disorder or public nuisance, it is open to a responsible authority such as the police, the environmental health services, or any member of the public to seek a review of the premises' licence. At review, the licensing committee may decide to amend that premises' opening hours or to require other measures, such as door supervisors taking greater responsibility for the swift and peaceful dispersal of customers. For what it is worth, I remember visiting Newcastle last summer and going around the town centre with the police. The system that I viewed appeared to work extremely well in terms of co-ordination between the police and licensed bodies, all in the name of having a vibrant night-time economy while also protecting the interests of residents.

The hon. Lady asked me about temporary event notices, commonly known as TENs, which are intended to be a light-touch process. They allow licensable activities such as the sale of alcohol or regulated entertainment that are not authorised by a premises licence to be carried out. Licensed premises typically give a TEN to extend their hours on the occasion of an event of sporting or national significance, or when hosting a family celebration. It is worth noting that TENs are also valued by community groups, as one may be issued to allow, for example, the sale of alcohol at a fête taking place on unlicensed premises.

The Government are keen to remove unnecessary licensing burdens on businesses and other premises, to encourage economic activity and community vitality. Changes introduced by the Deregulation Act 2015 increased the number of TENs that can be held each year from 12 to 15, to give greater flexibility. In 2017, the House of

Lords Select Committee on the Licensing Act recommended the introduction of a system for notifying local councillors and residents about TENs. In response, we have amended our statutory guidance to ask licensing authorities to consider making their register available online, or simply to provide details of TENs received on their website.

I do not think the hon. Member for City of Durham mentioned cumulative impact assessments, but they may be relevant in the context of this debate. A CIA may be considered in areas where there is evidence to show that the number or density of licensed premises is having a cumulative impact, leading to problems that are undermining the licensing objectives. In publishing a CIA, a licensing authority is setting down a strong statement of intent about its approach to considering applications for the grant or variation of premises licences in a specified area. The CIA does not, however, change the fundamental way in which licensing decisions are made. It is therefore open to the licensing authority to grant an application when it considers it appropriate, and when the applicant can demonstrate through its operating schedule that it would not be adding to the cumulative impact. However, CIAs are tools that are available.

The hon. Lady pressed me on the issue of public engagement with the licensing system, and I absolutely understand that point. The Government wish to encourage greater community involvement in licensing decisions. It is, of course, important that local residents are given the opportunity to have their say regarding licensing decisions that may affect them. In order to have their say, they need to be aware, which is why applications for a premises licence must be advertised in the local newspaper and on a notice outside the premises for 28 days. As I have already mentioned, many local authorities also post details of applications and notices on their websites.

From time to time, there have been calls for licensing authorities to be obliged to notify all residents within a certain radius when an application for a premises licence is made. It is our view that the present arrangements are sufficient, and that such a requirement would be both costly and unnecessary. The licensing authorities are, however, required to publish a statement of licensing

policy every five years. As we have discussed, that seems to be at the heart of this debate; that is the major opportunity to change policy and change how the law is enacted in Durham.

I should point out to the hon. Lady that as part of our work as a Government, we have run two phases of what is called the local alcohol action areas programme; its second phase closed in January. That programme engaged directly with 32 local areas and provided support to implement plans to tackle alcohol-related issues. It appears to have been well received, and we are considering how we can build on that foundation for the third phase of the programme. It is quite possible that Durham could offer some valuable insight in those discussions, because one of the items we are considering is how licensing works in practice, and we will be looking to engage with a number of areas. Durham may be highly relevant in that third phase.

I spoke earlier about the Licensing Act achieving the right balance between the benefits of employment, profits for business and enjoyment for the public provided by a thriving night-time economy, and the need for licensed premises to operate responsibly to ensure public safety and avoid public nuisance. The Government believe that the Act strikes the right balance. When there are problems in the night-time economy relating to late-night opening or the number or density of premises, which I think is the hon. Lady's point, the Act provides measures that can be used to tackle them.

To come back to my central point, the actions of the county council seem to be at the heart of this debate about the appropriateness of licensing policy in Durham. Those actions are embodied in the statement of licensing policy, which is up for its five-year review. That consultation, and the county council's response to it, seem to be the key. By securing this debate, and by presenting her argument so eloquently, forcefully and passionately, I am sure that the hon. Lady has ensured that her message—which I know represents the views of many residents in Durham—will be heard loud and clear by the local authority.

Question put and agreed to.

Trophy Hunting

4.29 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered trophy hunting.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. This debate about trophy hunting takes place within a much wider context. For example, we learned from a recent Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report published just a few days ago that humanity threatens a million species with extinction—species that cover the full range of biodiversity. Although extinctions have always occurred, the report makes it clear that we are witnessing a man-made tragedy on an unprecedented scale. Since 1970, the world's human population has doubled. The global economy has quadrupled in size and international trade has grown tenfold, and yet as the human footprint has expanded, nature has suffered dramatically. In that same timeframe, we have lost half of the world's wild animals. We continue to lose around 20 million hectares of forest a year. Only 13% of the world's wetlands that existed in 1700 still survive today. A third of fish stocks are now harvested at unsustainable levels and live coral cover has more than halved. Perhaps most starkly of all, a quarter of all animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction. That is a rate of destruction hundreds of times higher than the average of the past 10 million years.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. The world's pre-eminent experts have highlighted that we as humans have wiped out more than 60% of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles just within the past 50 years, implying that the annihilation of wildlife is an emergency that threatens civilisation itself. On top of that, we have pathetic, reckless, foolish individuals engaged in trophy hunting. Does he agree that a lot more needs to be done by the Government to tackle the evil wildlife trade and to clamp down on trophy hunting? I hope we will hear some concrete measures from the Minister today.

Zac Goldsmith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The statistics he cites are absolutely right. That is a mere blink in evolutionary terms; another blink of inaction, and we could wipe out what remains. I will come to the point about trophy hunting soon.

We are exhausting the planet, and we need radical and immediate action to reverse that. I will not claim today that tackling trophy hunting will reverse this mass extinction—far from it—but I put the debate in that context to remind us all of what is at stake and the situation we find ourselves in.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Trophy hunting has become an industry in Africa. They see people coming from the United States and just killing tigers, for no apparent reason other than that they think they are getting a thrill out of killing the animal and can post it back to the United States or wherever they come from. I know that the British Government are doing a bit of work on that. We had a good example of that with the ban on animals being used in circuses. The exploitation of animals and the rainforest are going to have a major impact on climate change in the world before long.

Zac Goldsmith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I will come to the points he raised later. Despite the appalling background that I and others have already described, we do care about nature in this country. It is often rightly said that we are a nation of animal lovers. I am proud of things that have happened even on this Government's watch. We have banned microbeads and ensured that CCTV is required in every slaughterhouse. We are finally prohibiting the use of wild animals in circuses. That took a while to happen, but it is happening. We have banned the ivory trade. We have world-leading legislation. We have extended the blue belt to protect vast swathes of the world's oceans. We have done much more besides that, but the need to protect animal welfare does not stop at our borders, and that is why I want to highlight the issue of trophy hunting today.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): No one is in any doubt as to the hon. Gentleman's commitment to these issues. He just mentioned things outside our borders. I apologise if I pre-empt what the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) is here to say, but there is also real concern about what is happening in Woburn on the estate owned by the Duke of Bedford. Tourists are paying up to £7,000 to shoot deer there. That is another form of canned trophy hunting, but it is happening in this country, not very far from where we are now. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that also should be prohibited?

Zac Goldsmith: I think that issue will be raised later in the debate. It is not an issue that I know a huge amount about, but from what I do know, I very much share the hon. Lady's concerns, and I thank her for raising them.

On a personal level, I believe that shooting beautiful endangered wild animals purely for sport is barbaric and perverse. I think the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs spoke for many when he said recently that he had an "emotional problem" with trophy hunting. It is no surprise that a poll found 93% of the public opposed to trophy hunting. Earlier this week, the Commons digital engagement team kindly asked members of the public for their views in advance of this debate, and there was a huge response. Many thousands of people responded and, unsurprisingly, the vast majority were opposed to the practice, describing it as "abhorrent," "appalling," "barbaric", and more besides.

Members will remember the tragic story of Cecil the lion, a beautiful and much celebrated animal, shot dead by a trophy hunter in Zimbabwe in 2015. I remember feeling sickened by the sight of celebrity hunter Melissa Bachman gloating on Twitter and Facebook, smirking alongside dead bears, crocodiles, lions and so many other beautiful animals, but the issue goes far wider than the stories that occasionally make it into the mainstream media or even social media. A 2016 report by the International Fund for Animal Welfare revealed that as many as 1.7 million hunting trophies crossed borders between 2004 and 2014, at least 200,000 of which were from threatened species. The US accounts for a staggering 71% of them. In 2016, 1,203 trophies were taken from the most endangered species of all—those listed on appendix I of the convention on international trade in endangered species.

Some of those species are in real trouble. Wild lion numbers, for example, may now be as low as 15,000, which is a 43% decline in just 21 years. Only 415,000 African elephants remain, when there were more than 3 million a century ago. The black rhino population has recovered a bit, but there are still just 5,000. It therefore seems perverse that the hunting continues, and in many cases is all perfectly legal. We sometimes hear from the hunters when they are pushed, charged or challenged that they do it for the love of the animal or for the love of nature, but could anyone who loves and respects the noble lion or the gentle giraffe even entertain the idea of paying thousands of pounds to butcher them?

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given what the hon. Gentleman has said, will he clarify something for me? I am mystified as to why the UK Government's position, according to the Secretary of State, is that the UK will not yet be banning imports from trophy hunting. That is the central point of the debate where I want to put pressure on the Government, but I genuinely want to know the hon. Gentleman's understanding of why that is the case.

Zac Goldsmith: I cannot speak for the Government, but I will attempt to answer that question in the remaining minutes of my speech. I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman and I are largely on the same page.

Having said what I have said about the moral conundrum or the moral case for or against trophy hunting, it is important for the sake of this debate—the Government certainly have to do this—to separate the moral arguments from the conservation arguments. Morally, the issue is largely black and white. We are either comfortable with endangered wild animals being killed for fun or we are not, but from a conservation point of view, I have to acknowledge, not least because I have just been in a big discussion with conservation groups arguing about the issue, that the issue is at least more nuanced than that. I will explain why, but before I do, I will give way.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for what he does on conservation work across the world. We are much indebted to him for his leadership. He referred to conservation. When we have any conversations about animals or animal welfare, we must always be sure to discuss conservation, because it is so important. How can we do better at conserving wildlife and ensuring that the habitat is still there to sustain the animals? Some of the reasons for the decreasing numbers are habitat loss and poor management. He has secured this debate, and I know he wants to add hippopotamuses to the Ivory Act 2018. I fully support him in that.

Zac Goldsmith: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point to habitat loss, which is the biggest cause of extinction. I have an idea—I will mention it right at the end of the debate, if that is okay—that would help to address that problem.

It would be wrong if I failed to acknowledge the live debate between experts, NGOs and even conservation charities about hunting. There are those who argue that it can contribute to conservation. Those in favour of trophy hunting say, for example, that it is nothing compared to the threat of habitat loss, illegal poaching, human and animal conflict and so on, which contribute a great deal more to the decline in species, and that we

should focus on them instead. The first part of that is true, but it does not strike me as an argument against taking action to tackle trophy hunting. We could say, but I do not think we would, that we should not worry about deforestation because it is not as big a part of the climate change problem as transport, for instance.

Those in favour of trophy hunting also say that it can generate important revenue for deprived areas of the world—revenue that can be spent on preserving habitat and protecting endangered species more widely. That is an important argument, which needs to be examined properly. The problem—the Minister will probably make the same point—is that there is simply not enough evidence or data to back up that assertion. I am struck by the way in which pro-conservation arguments in favour of trophy hunting are always phrased. Trophy hunting is okay if it is properly regulated, if the fees go to local communities and if it is sustainable. I suspect that advocates of those arguments are arguing for something that, although it is undoubtedly done to a higher standard occasionally, just does not exist on a wide scale.

The Government use a similar argument. In explaining the Government's position, Ministers have said that sustainable trophy hunting can play a part in species conservation efforts, including providing funding for conservation. I have three questions about that approach. First, are Ministers confident that the large fees charged for trophy hunting are actually being spent on conservation, rather than going to those organising the hunts? There is very little evidence that the money is genuinely reinvested in protecting habitats or helping local communities.

Secondly, do Ministers really believe that the money generated from hunting is preferable to the much larger sums that could be generated, where appropriate, from such things as wildlife tourism and sustainable land use? The Wildlife Trusts estimates that a live elephant is worth 76 times more than a dead elephant.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Is it not rather hard to create the right culture and educative environment if we say, "Oh yes, if you're rich you can go and shoot a few elephants or whatever, but if you're some poor poacher, that's terrible—you mustn't do that"? We have to say that it is completely unacceptable behaviour whether someone is rich or poor.

Zac Goldsmith: I share my right hon. and learned Friend's view, and I will come to that shortly. I thank him for his intervention.

The third question for Ministers is: can we be confident that the legal hunting trade is not acting as a cover for the illegal trade in animal products, which the UK has been a world leader in fighting? We banned the legal ivory trade in the UK precisely because it often incentivised, and provided cover for, the illegal trade. Surely the same logic applies.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend, but, as he knows, I am about to go and give his apologies to IFAW for his absence from its celebrations. He mentioned the ban on the ivory trade—there is probably nobody in the Chamber who has not welcomed that—and he used the word "perverse" several times. Is it not perverse that although the Government have banned the ivory trade and justly claimed credit for doing so, they are permitting and

[Sir Roger Gale]

almost encouraging the killing of animals for trophies other than ivory, such as skins? Does it not make it even worse, and kick the bottom out of the conservation argument, that in South Africa lions are being bred as cubs to be released into the wild for no purpose other than to be shot? There is no conservation in that, is there?

Zac Goldsmith: My right hon. Friend is right that there is no conservation value in that whatever. Colleagues will raise that issue in more detail, but I will touch on it shortly.

My fear is that the existence of some small-scale examples of better practice is driving our policy generally on trophy hunting, without recourse to the wider evidence, which suggests that the real story of trophy hunting is a lot less rosy than those advocates would have us believe. Indeed, on almost every level there is reason to doubt the arguments in favour of trophy hunting.

When it comes to the claim that sustainable hunting supports local people, a report prepared for—not written by—the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which is the global authority on nature, said that hunting “serves individual interests, but not those of conservation, governments or local communities.”

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation and the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation, around 97% of hunting revenues stay within the hunting industry. Incidentally, just 0.03% of African GDP derives from hunting, when the prospects for expanding tourism are clearly far greater, and likely far more profitable for local communities. Another report written for the IUCN noted that 40% of the big game hunting zones in Zambia, and 72% in Tanzania, are now classified as depleted because the big game has simply been hunted out of those areas.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the greatest threats to some of those species is the growth of populations in continents such as Africa? Will he applaud work done by non-governmental organisations, such as one I have seen for myself at Amboseli, where IFAW has put people in place to co-ordinate the interface between wildlife and human beings, which has caused threats particularly to species such as lions? It is really important that that is where resources go.

Zac Goldsmith: I could not agree more strongly. The best conservation projects harness the power of people at the grassroots—people who then directly benefit from an emerging economy in conservation. There are so many examples—not enough to buck the trends that I mentioned at the beginning, but some really inspiring ones that I could spend hours relaying. However, I will not do that, as I am going to allow another intervention.

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I have applied to speak, but in case there is not time, I could not let the point about Zambia go. I lived in that country many years ago, in the Luangwa Valley, which was a game reserve and which, as my hon. Friend pointed out, is now totally depleted of the richness that it had years ago. Does he agree that, were we to ban—as Ségolène Royal has done in France, and as has been done in

Australia and the Netherlands—the importing of what are regarded as prize trophies, such a ban would deplete the hunger for trophies and their magical status? Perhaps other countries would follow suit, and the appetite for barbaric trophy hunting would begin to die down.

Zac Goldsmith: I strongly agree, and I will come to that. On the claims about the conservation value of trophy hunting, I will make one other point. The findings that I described were echoed by a US congressional report, which was damning in its conclusion. It stated:

“Claiming that trophy hunting benefits imperiled species is significantly easier than finding evidence to substantiate it.”

It added that

“it is difficult to confidently conclude that any particular trophy import would enhance the survival of a species.”

There are other problems with trophy hunting. For instance, the idea that all the animals are killed quickly and cleanly is a myth. Cecil, the lion I mentioned earlier, took 11 hours to die, and it is reported that 50% of animals that are hunted are wounded rather than killed straight away. In addition, hunters invariably prize the rarer species, meaning that the most endangered species—lions, giraffes, elephants and so on—are disproportionately targeted. In addition to that, hunters prize the biggest and most impressive of those animals—the elephants with the largest tusks or lions with the largest manes. Trophy hunting therefore risks weakening the gene pool as well.

Finally, there is the revolting practice that has already been mentioned of canned hunting, in which animals are bred to be hunted and then shot like fish in a bowl. It has been widely covered recently in the UK press, thanks largely to investigative work by Lord Ashcroft. It is not reflective of all trophy hunting, but it is on the increase, especially with lion farms in South Africa. As well as the ethical horror of breeding animals simply to shoot them for fun, such farms supply the trade in lion bones, which in turn fuels, and provides cover for, illegal trade in the same products.

I received letters in the run-up to the debate saying that we must be conscious of so-called “conservation colonialism”. Clearly that is right, and I do not disagree with that. Whatever we think about trophy hunting, we cannot dictate laws for African countries. However, we can focus on our domestic responsibilities. Between 2007 and 2016, UK hunters brought home 2,638 trophies, of which 15% were from the most endangered species. The flow of trophy imports into the UK is increasing, with 12 times as many trophies taken between 2010 and 2017 as were taken in the decade from 1981 to 1990.

It seems particularly perverse, as my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) said, that even though we have taken a leading role in banning the ivory trade, elephants remain by far the most popular trophy of choice for British game hunters. Clearly, we cannot ban trophy hunting overseas, and it is not our place to do so, but we can reduce demand for it. Australia and France have banned the import of lion trophies, and the Netherlands has gone further and banned trophies from several threatened species.

I want the UK to take the lead and introduce a ban, or even, for now, a moratorium, on the import of hunting trophies, in particular from those species listed as threatened or endangered. My early-day motion 1829

calling for that has attracted the support of 166 colleagues, making it the third most signed early-day motion this Session.

In 2015, the then Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, whom I am very pleased to see as the new Secretary of State for International Development, promised that

“the Government will ban lion trophy imports by the end of 2017 unless there are improvements in the way hunting takes place in certain countries, judged against strict criteria.”

Is the Minister going to tell us that those improvements have been made? I cannot find any evidence of that whatever.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, for whom I have huge admiration and respect, has explained his refusal to act immediately on trophy hunting by saying that he wants to be “cautious”. He is right to be cautious, and he is right that there is a genuine debate on the issue, but surely the cautious thing would be to introduce a moratorium on trophy imports now until robust scientific evidence shows that they are a clear net positive for conservation. We should also use our international role to argue for trophy hunting to be removed as an exception to trade under CITES appendix I, because it is absurd that CITES recognises species as endangered but permits trophy hunting as an exception to the ban on trading them.

I will finish where I began. Global nature is in crisis, and we must act. Banning imports of hunting trophies will not, on its own, save species; I have spoken before about the need to divert more of our aid spending towards protecting and restoring nature, not least as a means of tackling and alleviating poverty. However, by supporting trophy hunting and allowing its proceeds into the UK, we are actively supporting an activity whose conservation benefits are dubious at best. The evidence suggests that it is actually causing harm to endangered species and that its proceeds rarely, if ever, reach local communities.

I hope that the practice of trophy hunting will stop; I recognise that that will work only if it is replaced by other sources of income, which will not happen overnight, but we should be so much more ambitious for conservation. After all, is it not dispiriting to argue that the best that we can do for endangered species is allow wealthy people to come in and shoot them? Surely we can do better than that.

4.51 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on securing this debate. He is one of the foremost experts on ecology and conservation, not only in this Chamber but in Parliament, and he always speaks with passion and love for the environment. I congratulate him on another outstanding speech.

Most level-headed people are disgusted and outraged by the trophy hunting trade. As the hon. Gentleman said, clients—mostly from Europe and the USA—pay thousands of pounds to take part in hunts and keep trophies such as an animal’s head or skin. The worst thing about this horrible trade is how proponents and apologists make an utter nonsense to justify such brutal acts. One trophy hunter said that he hunts mostly because he enjoys it, but also because he wants “to try and preserve those wild places in Africa”—

what a patronising view of the African continent!—

“but the only way they get preserved is if there’s money. If it doesn’t pay, it doesn’t stay—it’s as simple as that.”

It seems to me that trophy hunting is a trade that deals in killing animals.

Sir Oliver Heald: Surely they are not preserved—they are stuffed.

Chris Evans: That is exactly the point: they are not preserved. Common sense dictates that if people go around shooting every animal in sight, there will soon be none left to kill, so there will be no trade anyway. What is the point?

The hon. Member for Richmond Park spoke about fantastic things that the Government have done with the Opposition’s wholehearted support, such as banning the ivory trade. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) pointed out, the essential question is why they have not banned trophy hunting. The hon. Member for Richmond Park has already cited the commitment that the International Development Secretary made as an Environment Minister in November 2015 that

“the Government will ban lion trophy imports by the end of 2017”. That has not happened.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park spoke about the death of Cecil the lion in Zimbabwe in 2015. Australia, France and the Netherlands underlined their outrage by banning the import of lion trophies. At the time, the UK pledged to do the same

“unless there are improvements in the way hunting takes place”.

That has yet to happen.

I have been a Member of this House for nine years, and I know that a lot of people attack early-day motions as parliamentary graffiti or as a waste of time. In debates like this, however, I sometimes wish that the Government would take action on sensible early-day motions such as the hon. Gentleman’s, which

“calls on the Government to commit to halting imports of hunting trophies”.

The Government should adopt its eminently sensible suggestion

“that nature tourism is a humane and more effective means of conserving wildlife and supporting local communities”.

Nature tourism is more accessible financially and for families. It has a wider pool of customers, clients and tourists, which means more money. It is also more sustainable, because it does not involve the threat that endangered species will eventually run out because they have all been killed. By supporting it, we could end the trophy hunting industry at a stroke, allowing animals to live out their lives and be observed from afar. It is more sustainable and long-lasting, as well as more educational and humane; it would be a more compassionate way of supporting rural communities.

The export and import of hunting trophies from endangered species must be licensed under the convention on international trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora. CITES is implemented across the EU, but EU regulations go beyond its requirements. I did not want to mention the B-word, because I am sure that we are all fed up with it, but Brexit really is involved. The Government should look at what the EU is doing.

[Chris Evans]

In February 2016, it launched an action plan to tackle illegal wildlife trafficking, including 32 measures that must be carried out by 2020. Assuming that we have left the EU by 2020, will we still commit to that action plan?

I have known the Minister for a long time. I am not sure whether she remembers this, but many years ago she gave her maiden speech just before I gave mine. Since then, her career has flown up to the top, while mine—well, that is another story.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): You have a lovely wife, though.

Chris Evans: Thank you very much—I will pass that on to her tonight.

There are three main areas of the EU action plan that I hope the Minister will adopt:

“Prevent trafficking and reduce supply and demand of illegal wildlife products...Enhance implementation of existing rules and combat organised crime more effectively by increasing cooperation between competent enforcement agencies...Strengthen cooperation between source, destination and transit countries...and provide long term sources of income to rural communities living in wildlife-rich areas.”

Another issue that we have to look at is the involvement of criminal gangs. The trophy hunting trade is greatly abused, with gangs increasingly using the system to traffic wildlife and items such as rhino horns, which are fraudulently exported to places such as Vietnam. In its 2016 report on EU trade policy and the wildlife trade, the European Parliament’s Committee on International Trade found that most common offences relate to corruption, the fraudulent obtaining or forgery of licences, money laundering, and drug trafficking.

Simply put, trophy hunting brings misery to communities all over the world and should be stamped out. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs says that his ambition is to regulate wildlife as much as possible. However, between 2013 and 2017—under this Government’s watch—global trophy imports increased by 23%. Why anybody would want an animal on their wall or fur on their floor is beyond me, but in 2017 there were 16 recorded trophy imports to the UK—a reduction from the 46 in 2016. If there is not much appetite for trophy imports in the UK, surely we should ban them anyway. We should ban them on moral grounds, on legal grounds and above all because, as a nation of animal lovers, it is our duty. I hope that the Minister will have some good news for us this afternoon.

4.58 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher, and to follow the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans)—not least because he has spent a long time teaching me how to pronounce his constituency. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on securing this important debate and on his excellent speech, which was characteristically passionate about our natural environment.

I would like to focus on the trophy hunting of lions. More than 15 years ago, I was privileged to see lions, along with many other incredible animals, in the Tanzanian wild, where I could appreciate at first hand the beauty of those creatures in their natural habitat. I remember

to this day my sense of awe at the vibrancy and diversity of animals in a national park that stretched further than the eye could see. I thought how incredibly lucky I was to be sharing that part of the planet with them at that very moment.

On Saturday, I took my three-year-old son to Port Lympne, where the Aspinall Foundation is doing some amazing work. We got to see a little bit behind the scenes, including meeting—behind secure fencing, I hasten to add—two Barbary lions. One roared, and I could see the same awe in Freddie’s eyes that was in mine when I heard a different type of lion roar in Africa. However, the Barbary lion is extinct in the wild, and it suddenly became very clear that my son’s experience last weekend might be, if we are not careful, the closest he will come to seeing a lion if the current rate of hunting is allowed to continue. As the Aspinall Foundation says on its website:

“All subspecies of lion are now threatened in the wild mainly due to conflict with people.”

The Library’s briefing paper on trophy hunting from March 2017 talks about the “sport” of hunting lions. As someone with a clear interest in sport, I would say it is not a sport. I struggle to see the difference between illegal poachers, who hunt animals to sell valuable assets such as rhino tusks and who are rightly condemned by the majority of the world, and the privileged businesspeople from this country and others who travel to Africa and kill these beautiful creatures for their personal gratification. There is a clear difference between bringing a lion’s head home to place on the mantelpiece and real conservation of these animals. I believe that Government policy of carefully managed hunting playing a part in species preservation is disappointing, unfounded and potentially dangerous going forward.

The UK has a duty to support the establishment of new national parks, and the protection of existing ones, where lions and other animals can live freely without the threat of hunting or poaching. The tourism industry in such countries clearly relies on the visibility of these animals, so their numbers must be protected and increased through careful conservation, which would be of greater benefit to national economies than the money brought in by hunting. In fact, there are rather criminal figures showing that communities in sub-Saharan Africa that give up land to hunters receive just 50 cents per head each year. Hunting areas provide just 37 cents per square kilometre to the Government of Tanzania, whereas maize cultivation can provide up to \$25,000 per square kilometre. In fact, using land for hunting generates the least amount of money for Governments out of all forms of land use in Africa. It is clear that the past argument for hunting as providing support for conservation efforts is untrue, and many former parks where animals have been hunted to near extinction have become wildlife deserts, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park noted.

I supported the Prime Minister on her visit to Africa last year, where she outlined her ambition for a closer relationship between Britain and African Commonwealth nations that would benefit both. This new relationship with Africa should have both cross-party and cross-departmental support, and the new International Development Secretary spoke recently of African prosperity and good, old British values such as humility and innovation. However, there is nothing innovative in allowing this dated and inhumane trade in hunting trophies from the African continent to the UK.

The UK had an opportunity to be a global leader in preventing trophy hunting imports, a move that has overwhelming public support. Instead, we have sat on our hands while countries such as France and Australia have introduced outright bans and the USA has made it increasingly difficult to import by making individuals prove that the killing of the animal led to greater conservation of the species. Frankly, we should be ashamed of ourselves for missing out on the opportunity to take the lead. It does not mean that public pressure has disappeared: a petition by LionAid to ban lion trophy hunting imports into the UK has reached over 370,000 signatures and continues to accumulate further support. The disdain for stories of trophy hunting is real, and I hope the Minister recognises that there is public appetite for changing the law.

If anyone is in any doubt about why the Government's current position is wrong, I encourage them to meet Peter and Christine from LionAid. Even without their briefing, and at a time when we have the opportunity in an ever-changing geopolitical world to showcase ourselves as animal welfare and environmental champions, we need to ask ourselves whether we in Britain want to allow trophies from hunting lions and other endangered species to adorn our walls as the only reminder for the next generation of what they could have seen if we, the current crop of politicians, had taken action.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): We will start the wind-ups at 5.10 pm. I call Nadine Dorries.

5.4 pm

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Chope. I had no intention of speaking today as I came to listen and learn, but I feel compelled to respond to the comments about Woburn Safari Park and make some other points. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is no longer in her place, but she said concerns were raised about Woburn. Woburn is in my constituency. As the local MP, I have not heard about or been contacted by email or in any other way about such concerns with Woburn Safari Park or Woburn Abbey Deer Park.

I am passionate about animal welfare, as anybody who follows me on Twitter or knows me will be aware. It was important to me that I got to know both the safari park and the staff who worked there, and that I did my own appraisal of the conditions the animals were kept in and how they lived. I am in awe of both the research and the conservation work that takes place at Woburn in order to contribute to the preservation of various species. In fact, at Woburn—if I had known I was going to speak about this today, I would have got a list before I came—there are not only endangered species, but species that are extinct in the wild, ranging from insects to big game and other animals. They are looked after incredibly well, so I support Woburn Safari Park in its work.

On the deer park and culling, I was reassured on Friday that deer have to be culled, because an old deer left to die in a pack in a park does not have a pleasant death. No deer takes longer than three seconds to die. They are shot, and a marksman rides on the wing with the person doing the shooting. If the deer is not shot instantly, a second shot is fired almost immediately. That has to happen.

I want to follow on from the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch). I lived in Zambia 35 years ago. I spent part of my time in the Luangwa Valley, which was a beautiful, rich and vibrant game reserve. People would walk instead of going in jeeps; I spent time there on walking safaris. I recently spoke to friends who live out there, in what was a beautiful, lush and incredible place. I will never forget being stuck on a riverbed when we were in a jeep and about to be chased by a bull elephant. I will never forget coming across a pride of lions at night, with a light and a halogen lamp. Slowly, one by one, little cubs came out from under the bushes, and the female lions licked them and patted them back into bed again. It was incredible to watch. The behaviour was so like our behaviour—the behaviour of a mother with her young replicated in those animals. It is so sad to hear that people are now going out there to trophy hunt and shoot those animals illegally.

I also wanted to make a point about what the Government should be doing about rhino horn. Anyone who has seen a rhino left for dead after having its horn removed by poachers will know it is a sight that cannot be unseen—it is there in our brains. We should be looking at how we can ban trophy hunting in this country. I see no reason why we cannot do that immediately, out of pure compassion and a desire to stop this behaviour from being normalised, and to prevent it from having any kind of credibility. By allowing it in this country, we almost give it a stamp of credibility. The UK is the fifth-richest nation in the world, and one of the most civilised. If we think it is okay, we rubber stamp trophy hunting. Surely we should dispel the impression that it is something we approve of. Out of compassion, if nothing else, why not ban it immediately in the UK?

We should be engaging with our international partners. Rhino horn, which has the same composition as compressed fingernails and toenails, is exported illegally to countries such as China and Vietnam. We should have conversations with our international partners and try our utmost to prevent them from claiming these awful, dreadful prizes and from believing that rhino horn possesses qualities that it does not. We cannot do that unless we take a stand. Unless we say, "We ban the import of these trophies," we cannot have those conversations with other countries and ask them to ban or limit the import of rhino horns, lion heads and other dreadful trophies.

5.10 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) for securing the debate and for his thorough summary of this issue and the wider one of the risk of extinction. I agree with very much of what he said. He and others cited some sobering statistics, but one of the positive, encouraging stats was that 93% of the public oppose trophy hunting. That tells us that there is very little risk to banning it: the public would support it.

Across our nations, we are all animal lovers. I myself am a big cat fan; the pun is intended. I have a small—well, not so small—tabby cat who thinks he is a lion. If he saw the danger lions are in, he might change his mind.

[*Martyn Day*]

The practice of trophy hunting is abhorrent to many, including me. I fail to see its attraction. It deprives endangered species of healthy individuals, and perhaps as many as half of the animals are wounded, rather than killed, with some taking days to die. In fact, I worry about the mindset of those who find pleasure in the practice. I just do not get it. I say that irrespective of whether it relates to endangered or non-protected species, and whether it takes place abroad or at home.

It is important that we do not confuse this issue with legitimate pest control, the management of habitats and conservation issues. The SNP takes the welfare of domestic and wild animals very seriously. We are committed to protecting the welfare of animals. Our manifesto promised to support more animal welfare measures with a global focus. My colleagues and I supported the passage of the Ivory Bill in the Commons, and we welcome the UK Government's progress in tackling the illegal ivory trade. I hope we will see a total ban on ivory sales as a result.

The Scottish Government will continue to legislate to improve animal welfare and will establish a Scottish animal welfare commission to advise on the welfare of both wild and domestic animals, and how it should be improved. They will introduce new legislation and issue Scottish Government guidance. Last year, the First Minister noted concerns about the current rules, which permit the stalking and hunting of animals. She has confirmed that a review of current hunting laws will be carried out. The Scottish Government are therefore reviewing trophy hunting in Scotland and considering whether changes in the law are required.

Although there is much we can do in our nations, many of the endangered species under threat from trophy hunting are to be found abroad. In the European Parliament, Alyn Smith, who was our MEP and is heading up our list for Scotland at the moment, has been very active on this issue. He signed a letter to President Trump, expressing concern about the US Administration's decision to lift the ban on elephant trophy imports from Zimbabwe.

A number of countries have introduced positive bans on trophy imports; Australia, the Netherlands and France have all banned lion trophy imports. I would welcome action from the UK Government on that and would certainly support such a move here.

It is estimated that there are now about 20,000 lions left in the wild, and some figures suggest far fewer; the hon. Member for Richmond Park suggested that it is 15,000. That certainly shows that we have a real problem. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) covered much of the lion issue. I will not repeat what she said—I agree with it entirely—but I want to highlight her point that all sub-species of lion are now threatened in the wild. That is a very sobering, frightening fact.

I am grateful to the briefing from LionAid, which was circulated in advance of this debate. It contains many good points in support of a ban on the import of lion trophies. I particularly agree that, at the very least, requiring evidence that an imported lion trophy has benefited conservation of the species and that hunting profits have benefited local communities would be desirable if a full ban is not introduced.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Obviously, killing animals for sport is totally unacceptable. Does my hon. Friend agree that hunting lions does not benefit conservation in any way? That is the presumption of the recent change in US regulations. Why cannot the UK do exactly the same? If the US can do it, we should be able to.

Martyn Day: I agree entirely. Indeed, the US ban led to a reduction of 90% in imports of such trophies. We would all benefit from that. There is very little financial benefit from trophy hunting to local communities. The Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting has highlighted that it amounts to 0.3% of GDP in African nations, while photographic safaris generate 40 times as much. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) spoke about the benefits of nature tourism. Those nations could gain much more financial benefit from that.

In conclusion, I hope the UK Government will consider a full ban on trophy hunting. I welcome the consensual nature of this debate, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to participate.

5.14 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on securing this debate. We have heard several useful interventions from Members of all parties—I would especially like to mention those of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson). Not only was my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) passionate, but he showed identifiable ways forward to help to bring this horrible trade to an end. We also heard passionate speeches from the hon. Members for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) and for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who exposed the spurious financial arguments for hunting.

When I spoke for Labour to support the Ivory Bill, which the Government were taking through the House, we debated the extent to which sales of old ivory could disguise the continuation of the slaughter of elephants in pursuit of the trade in ivory. Clearly, selling an ivory-handled hairbrush made in the 1950s would not in itself cause the death of any more elephants, but the very fact that the trade in ivory was still legal gave merchants dealing in fresh ivory a market for their goods. I am very pleased and proud of what this House decided to do, with unanimous, cross-party support.

Having taken such a firm line on the ivory trade, how can we possibly support the importation of hunting trophies, which can include parts of those self-same elephants? We have heard the appalling statistics from the hon. Member for Richmond Park: 1.7 million dead animals, or bits of dead animals, were imported over the previous decade, according to an International Fund for Animal Welfare report from 2016, including 10,000 lions. Britain is one of the world's 12 most prolific countries for killing lions and elephants, and bringing bits of their dead bodies back. Even with the National Rifle Association supporting international trophy hunters, the US does not allow the import of bits of dead cheetah, but the UK does. The CITES statistics show a 23% increase in the number of trophies imported globally over the four years from 2013 to 2017, amounting to 20,846 in 2017 alone.

Imports of some trophies have reduced in recent years. The number of southern white rhinos shot for their trophies went down from 75 in 2016 to 72 in 2017, but that is probably because there are so few left to shoot. How can we be so concerned about the possible extinction of rhino and still let people go out with the intention of shooting them and return with a bit of the animal to prove their action?

The word “trophy” suggests that there was a contest, in which the brave hunter managed against the odds to defeat the ferocious beast against which he was pitted and took part of the animal to remind himself of his accomplishment. In reality, so-called canned lions are bred in enclosures and factory farmed, and then released to be shot like clay pigeons. Even if such blatant preparation were stopped, there is no genuine contest involved in trophy hunting; the activity is just plain slaughter.

When we debated the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill last week, I made the point that it is not the number of animals that is at issue, but the degrading treatment and the inhumanity of taking pleasure in making them perform. How much more cruel, pointless and inhumane is it for a person to go out to another country and deliberately kill an animal just so they can put a bit of its dead body on the wall of their house? In this case, it is about not just the inhumanity but the numbers. Of the 1.7 million so-called trophies taken over the past decade, 200,000 were from endangered species.

We do not have to allow this preposterous practice to go on just because it is allowed by CITES. CITES is clearly not adequate for the preservation of international wildlife. It allows trophy hunters to shoot even species listed as critically endangered. It would not be helpful for this country to withdraw from CITES, but it is time for us to join with other nations in creating a framework for the genuine protection of wildlife around the world.

Trophy hunting does not protect against poaching. There is good evidence that poachers use the activity of legally sanctioned hunters as smokescreen for their own killing. Permits for hunting have been used by poachers to trade rhino horns. Two-thirds of hunting trophy export records are inaccurate, and there is no reason to suppose that some are not being used to cover poaching. In any case, what difference does it make whether a species is wiped out by poachers or by trophy hunters?

Hunting does not support the economies of the world's poorest countries in any meaningful way. Photographic safaris in African nations generate 40 times as much revenue as hunting, as revealed by this week's report from the Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting, which is based on United Nations figures. How much of that tourism income will be retained if all the animals that tourists come to see and photograph have been wiped out?

It is time for this country to act. Labour has already committed, in its animal welfare plan, to ending the import of all wild animal trophies from species classified as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and to extending that ban to species listed under CITES. There may be good grounds for going further and we would like to hear from those who think that we should explore that option.

Will the Minister tell us whether the Government plan, in the near future, a wide-ranging public consultation on trophy hunting and the import of wild animal parts, with the view to banning all imports of such trophies?

We cannot and must not allow the present situation to continue, and we cannot stand idly by while extraordinary and magnificent creatures are driven to extinction to satisfy the vanity and bloodlust of a tiny number of killers.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for this important debate, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) on securing it. I welcome the contributions that have been made.

I recognise that trophy hunting—some call it big game hunting—brings out strong and deeply held views and passions, as has been evident today. For many people, it is a straightforward ethical issue. Many people do not agree with any form of hunting or of killing animals in that way—by that, I mean not just fox hunting in this country, but deer stalking and shooting, which has been mentioned.

Although more people accept the need for culling to manage wildlife, it is not a simple issue and there is certainly no unified position among stakeholders. Many hon. Members will have received briefing packs from different stakeholders. We heard a lot today when we hosted a roundtable on this topic—my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park contributed—and listened to views to enhance our understanding and build on the available scientific evidence. I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that there were very different views on the evidence that was put forward, including a particular report, which he mentioned. An IUCN representative suggested that that was not their policy. We will get strong back and forth in discussions.

I assure Members that the Government take the conservation of species seriously. We should recognise that some countries see big game hunting as an effective conservation tool that can support local livelihoods and be an important source of funding to protect habitats and species, including those being hunted.

Various hon. Members referred to a statement made a couple of years ago by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). He commissioned a study into the impact of hunting on lions. That led to the report by Professor Macdonald of Oxford University called “Lion Conservation with Particular Respect to the Issue of Trophy Hunting”.

That report found little evidence of a negative effect on populations when the operation is sustainable, and found that game hunting can provide benefits to conservation as a financial incentive to protect lion habitats. A lot of the focus was on the practice of captivity breeding for hunting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park mentioned. When I was at CITES, I raised the issue of canned hunting and similar approaches with a South African Minister, and I raised tiger hunting with a Chinese Minister, so I can assure the House that we take those issues seriously. The report also highlights a risk that African nations who feel continually imposed upon may opt out of internationally important agreements such as CITES.

There has been a lot of discussion during this debate about species, and I will set out why we should treat countries individually, rather than considering Africa as

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

one nation. I am fully aware that elephants, lions and others do not know geographical boundaries, but different approaches have been taken and we work closely on those.

Our policy on imports starts from the point of EU regulations, which are considered by looking at both the species and the country. That is why there are different import restrictions on species by country or area. Trophies from hippos, for example, can be imported from Tanzania but not Mozambique, and at the moment, imports from Cameroon to the EU are suspended. A regional example is that trophies from African elephants in Tanzania can be imported to the EU only if they are from populations in set areas or reserves, such as the Serengeti. Currently, 10 species-country combinations have import suspensions at EU level, and there are numerous temporary import suspensions while additional evidence is gathered.

The EU wildlife trade regulations that implement CITES in the EU are directly applicable in the UK. When species are listed in annex A of those regulations, they require an import permit that will be issued only if a number of criteria are met, including a valid export permit from the relevant authorities of the exporting country. The applicant must provide that permit as documentary evidence that the specimens have been obtained in accordance with the legislation on the protection of that species from that country.

The Animal and Plant Health Agency is the licensing authority and it receives advice from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. APHA can refuse entry of the species listed in annex A, as well as of six species listed in annex B. APHA considers entry on a case-by-case basis with advice from the JNCC. On the status of big game imports to the UK in 2017, of the 63 permits requested, 44 were issued by the APHA and 41 were used.

Hon. Members referred to other countries. Australia has made probably the biggest change by making ineligible for import any animal that is listed in CITES appendix I, regardless of the country of origin. France has excluded specific parts of lions: heads, paws and skin. The Netherlands will no longer allow more than 200 species to enter the country. Interestingly, in a domestic situation, the Netherlands has a special place, Oostvaardersplassen, which is known as the Dutch Serengeti, where the policy was to allow nature to evolve. Unfortunately, that led to species starving to death, so while some aspects of culling wildlife may seem uncomfortable, it is sometimes necessary for animal welfare.

We have been discussing the legal wildlife trade, which understandably brings discomfort to many people, but, considering the wider perspective, the UK is showing

global leadership in tackling the illegal wildlife trade. We will, of course, continue to take the actions to which the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) referred. In fact, we are looking right now for another EU member state to take up the championing that the UK has done on the issue in the European Union for many years.

As with the international wildlife trade conference in London last year, we will continue to work with many countries and partners around the world. That is essential to achieve real change. In Africa, the UK is committed to supporting action in the KAZA, or Kavango-Zambezi, region to tackle IWT and to enhance biodiversity and the habitats of the wonderful animals there, and I hope to attend a wildlife economy summit next month.

I am very conscious that people see CITES as a way to allow trade. At the most recent CITES, in 2016, we pushed for and were successful in getting tougher controls on species from appendices I and II. The JNCC is doing some work for us on some of these things and on where we could consider potentially taking more action. We do not intend to have a consultation, but we are seeking views and gathering evidence to further our understanding.

It will always be challenging when scientific evidence does not necessarily provide support, which is why this might well come down to being a straightforward moral or ethical issue. However, we need to consider the wider impact, recognising the conflict that can happen and the unfortunate developments in parts of some African countries, where increasingly—in human-elephant and, in particular, human-lion conflicts—we see animals being poisoned by local communities as they take away people's livelihoods or go into areas where people live. We are still gathering the evidence—we do not have it yet—and I am interested in working with others on that. I am conscious that my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park may wish to respond for the remaining 15 seconds or so.

5.29 pm

Zac Goldsmith: The Minister will not be able to answer now, but I hope that as she gathers the evidence, if it emerges—I believe it will—that the practice of trophy hunting has no net positive effect for conservation, the Government will take the firm position that I think pretty much everyone in the debate has demanded. I thank hon. Members for their contributions, and I thank LionAid, Born Free and the Campaign to Ban Trophy Hunting for all their work to raise the issue right up the political agenda, resulting in this debate and, I hope, more to come.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 15 May 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Nuclear Energy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): Government's preparations for the UK's withdrawal from Euratom mean that the UK now has all the necessary measures in place to ensure that the UK nuclear industry can continue to operate with certainty in all situations.

On 22 February the UK and Japan signed an exchange of notes confirming how the terms of our existing 1998 nuclear co-operation agreement will operate in the context of the UK's withdrawal from Euratom.

The Nuclear Safeguards (Fissionable Material And Relevant International Agreements) (EU exit) Regulations 2019 and the Nuclear Safeguards (EU exit) Regulations 2019 and the Shipments Of Radioactive Substances (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 have been made. This means that Government have put in place all legislation needed ahead of the UK leaving Euratom to ensure that it can now operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state, and that civil nuclear trade can continue.

Government have also published further guidance to industry on no-deal arrangements in relation to the Transfrontier Shipment Of Radioactive Waste And Spent Fuel (EU exit) Regulations 2019, and the Shipments Of Radioactive Substances (EU Exit) Regulations 2019.

Today I will be depositing a report in the Libraries of both Houses that sets out further details on the overall progress on the Government's implementation

of their Euratom exit strategy, including EU negotiations, domestic operational readiness, legislation and international agreements. The report covers the three-month reporting period from 26 December to 26 March and is the third statutory report under section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018. The next report on Euratom exit progress is due to be deposited in July 2019.

[HCWS1557]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Recovery Champion

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In the 2017 drug strategy the Government committed to appointing a national recovery champion. The recovery champion will play a key role in delivering the Government's ambitions by helping improve the prospects of individuals seeking to recover from substance misuse.

I am pleased to announce today that I have appointed Dr Edward Day to the role of recovery champion. This appointment is for three years, with Dr Day's appointment commencing on 15 May 2019 and ending on 14 May 2022. The recovery champion role will extend to England only.

Dr Day has a wealth of experience in the substance misuse field, dealing directly with those who are dependent on drugs as well as informing national guidance and debate. He was one of the first within the field to champion the recovery agenda and to embed it successfully in local services. I am confident that he will make effective use of his considerable experience and extensive knowledge in drug and alcohol treatment and recovery in this role.

It is clear that substance misuse has a hugely damaging impact on individuals, families and communities. To support effective recovery outcomes across the country, Dr Day will work towards galvanising partners at national and local levels, offering advice to local partners on how evidence-based practice can be most effectively applied, and supporting collaboration at a national level through the Drug Strategy Board.

[HCWS1558]

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