

**Wednesday
5 June 2019**

**Volume 661
No. 308**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 5 June 2019

House of Commons

Wednesday 5 June 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

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

Electoral Integrity Consultation

1. **Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): When he plans to launch the consultation on electoral integrity announced on 5 May 2019. [911139]

13. **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): When he plans to launch the consultation on electoral integrity announced on 5 May 2019. [911153]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government recently announced measures to strengthen and protect our democratic processes, including a consultation on electoral integrity. Before we launch the consultation, we will hold discussions with interested groups and explore the scope for cross-party co-operation. It will be published in due course.

Ruth Cadbury: Earlier this year, my constituents were bombarded with Facebook adverts telling them that I was stealing Brexit and ignoring their votes. It has been reported that behind those adverts was hundreds of thousands of pounds of dark money. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that voters know who is funding political adverts on social media?

Kevin Foster: Part of our announcement was that we will bring in a requirement for digital imprints where candidates or campaigners are involved, and some social media platforms have already implemented that. We are also looking, as part of a wider consultation, at how to have modern and up-to-date electoral rules, but it is about ensuring that we do it well rather than quickly.

Alex Cunningham: The problem is much more widespread. *The Guardian* reported that American donors have given \$5.6 million to US funding bodies, which passed it to, among others, the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Adam Smith Institute and Policy Exchange. Will the consultation look specifically at how think-tanks are funded and by whom, or is the Minister worried that that is a little bit too close to home?

Kevin Foster: We are clear that the consultation needs to look at a wide range of issues, including the potential for shell companies or organisations to be used to funnel money into media campaigns. As I said in my initial answer, we are keen to get this right and to secure cross-party co-operation, so that we can have a robust system in law, because we know that any loopholes left in a rushed piece of legislation would be exploited.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of having integrity in the system is ensuring that it is easy for people to understand? Electoral systems are critical to that, so will he bring forward plans to introduce first past the post in all English elections?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a great advocate of the first-past-the-post system, which has served this country well for many generations, producing stable government. Any changes to introduce first past the post in other elections would have to compete for legislative time with other priorities.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Since we publicly raised concerns just over a year ago, the Conservative party has accepted more than £1 million from donors with links to Russia, including the wife of Vladimir Putin's former deputy Finance Minister, who has donated £112,500 to the Conservative party in the past three months alone, making a total of up to £626,000. Will the review that the Minister is undertaking look at links between the Conservative party and the biggest kleptocrat of all, President Putin?

Kevin Foster: The person referred to is actually a British citizen, but I am not going to take lectures on the influence of Russia in British politics from the Opposition, whose leader wanted us to hand over evidence to Russia after the Salisbury attack—rather than believing our intelligence service, he would rather believe Mr Putin's.

Electoral Registration: Non-UK EU Citizens

2. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate he has made of the number of non-UK EU citizens living in the UK who were unable to register to vote in the European parliamentary elections. [911140]

6. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of non-UK EU citizens living in the UK who were unable to register to vote in the European parliamentary elections. [911144]

10. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of non-UK EU citizens living in the UK who were unable to register to vote in the European parliamentary elections. [911150]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Cabinet Office does not collect or hold information on the number of eligible electors who do not register to vote in any election. The process for EU nationals to register and declare their intention to vote in the UK for these elections was similar to the system used in previous European parliamentary elections.

Rachael Maskell: Many of my constituents were denied a vote in the EU elections. Following yesterday's urgent question, it is clear that the Government failed to implement the recommendations of the 2014 Electoral Commission review, failed to follow EU law, failed to try to extend the deadline for submitting the UC1 form and failed to uphold the human rights of EU residents in the UK. Was that simply Government incompetence, or did they deliberately deny EU citizens the right to vote?

Kevin Foster: I am very clear that the Government followed our legal obligations, and on 5 April the Electoral Commission published guidance for electoral registration officers, reminding them to prepare and issue UC1 forms to EU citizens on the register. Again, I reject this; and, again, the system was similar to what we have had in previous European Union elections.

Vicky Foxcroft: On 23 May, my constituents Joanna Pardoe, Lues Huesca Molina, Paloma Luna, Peter Tait, Pierro Izzolino, Cristiana Bottigella, Sophie Beswick, Yaiza Rivero and dozens more were denied a vote in the EU elections. Yesterday, the Minister failed to apologise to them and the hundreds of other EU citizens who were unable to exercise their democratic right because of the impossible timetable set for Lewisham electoral services by this Government. Will he apologise today?

Kevin Foster: I am afraid the timetable is exactly the same legal timetable there has been for previous European parliamentary elections and, ultimately, ensuring compliance with it is the job of the local ERO.

Bambos Charalambous: Two campaign groups, the 3million and British in Europe, have raised more than £40 million to fund a legal challenge to the parliamentary election process. What assessment have the Government made of whether they took the necessary steps at the European elections to uphold article 3 of protocol 1 of the European convention on human rights, which protects our right to vote?

Kevin Foster: As said previously, the Government complied with all legal obligations and followed an almost identical process to what happened for previous European parliamentary elections. The requirement to make this declaration is part of European law, and we have to share such declarations before polling day. Again, while people may not like the outcome of those elections, I suggest they are better engaging with what voters said than trying to argue the process.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the UC1 form is not some arbitrary requirement, as has been suggested, but a core requirement of European law that is required of all European member states and has not been changed since previous elections?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right to say that this is a requirement that applied in 2009 and 2014, and there is a requirement under European law for us to have a declaration supplied to other member states about their citizens voting in this country to prevent double voting. It is interesting that those who are usually great fans of following European law did not want to follow this particular piece of it.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Yesterday, the Minister told me that he had received official advice that it would not be possible to bring forward a statutory instrument in advance of the European elections to allow more time for EU citizens to declare their intention on where they wished to vote and that that would not be possible because it would contravene European law. How can that be the case given that other European countries do it differently and that EU law sets no time requirements for registration, and will he publish the advice that he received?

Kevin Foster: EU law makes it clear that we have to supply details of the declarations sufficiently before polling day, which rather conflicts with the Scottish National party idea, suggested a couple of weeks ago, that we could fill in declarations at the polling station. Quite clearly, something cannot be done before polling day if the information is collected on polling day. We were clear that, with the timescales, we followed the legal process that was there from previous European parliamentary elections and complied with all our legal obligations.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On this matter, the Minister appears to be taking his cue from Shaggy, protesting, "It Wasn't Me". Six times yesterday, he refused to apologise to these EU citizens who have been disenfranchised. Can I suggest that he change the record and perhaps take his cue from Timbaland, and "Apologize"—apologise to those European citizens who have every right to vote in these elections, but were turned away on polling day?

Kevin Foster: It does seem like a bit of a broken record from the Labour party, and not an acceptance that this is exactly the same process EU citizens had to follow to vote in European parliamentary elections while the Labour party were in government. The best assessment will be the one done by the Electoral Commission, which will do so independently, following a statutory duty to review major polling events.

The Cornish People

3. **Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con):** What steps the Government are taking to support the recognition in 2014 under the Council of Europe framework convention for the protection of national minorities of the Cornish people as a national minority in the UK. [911141]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government are committed to meeting the requirement of the framework convention for the protection of national minorities in respect of Cornish populations. We work with Cornwall Council to encourage the promotion of Cornish culture, and we have committed £100,000 over two years to the council to support this.

Steve Double: I thank the Minister for his answer. In 2014, when the decision was made by the Council of Europe, the Government welcomed the decision and said that this would give the Cornish the same recognition as the other Celtic parts of the UK. Does the Minister share my view that, to keep this commitment, the Cornish

should be allowed to identify in the forthcoming census as Cornish by way of a tick-box, just as the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish will be able to do?

Kevin Foster: I always welcome the determination shown by my hon. Friend to be a strong Cornish voice for Cornwall in the Chamber and to put the county first on the agenda. The Government will be guided by the recommendation of the Office for National Statistics to the Government and Parliament about the demand for particular questions when we lay the census orders before Parliament later this year.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): One of the best ways in which the Department could recognise Cornish minority status is to drop the ludicrous suggestion of having a Cornwall-Devon boundary review. Will the Minister commit to giving the Cornish the same rights as the Welsh and the Scots?

Kevin Foster: The boundary review is independent, and in due course we will bring the orders before the House so that it can make a decision.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I rise with a degree of uncertainty, because ordinarily I seek to accommodate the hon. Lady, but the question has not been broadened by the character and contents of the answer, and I gently point out that Glasgow Central is a considerable distance from Cornwall. If she is sufficiently dextrous and can shoehorn an inquiry on Cornwall into a question about Cornwall that would be helpful.

Alison Thewliss: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence. Protection of the Cornish language is important, but there is no right, as there is for the Welsh, to write to the UK Government in Cornish, or to write to the UK Government in Gaelic and receive a response in that language. Would the Minister consider a UK language protection Bill that would protect Cornish and Scots Gaelic in the same way that Welsh is protected?

Kevin Foster: We can see that Celtic roots are strong, both in Cornwall and in Scotland, and that there is a link between them. We are always keen to help to promote the culture of these isles, and the different languages that are spoken across them are part of our vibrant United Kingdom. The Cabinet is always open to suggestions about how we can better do that, as the Department is keen to promote our Union.

Voter ID Pilots

4. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate he has made of the number of people in voter ID pilot areas who could not vote in the May 2019 local elections because they were unable to meet ID requirements. [911142]

11. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of people in voter ID pilot areas who could not vote in the May 2019 local elections because they were unable to meet ID requirements. [911151]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government are delivering a programme of work to strengthen the integrity of our electoral system and ensure that elections are secure and fit for the 21st century. Validated figures will be published as part of the evaluations undertaken both by the Cabinet Office and by the independent Electoral Commission of the 2019 pilots.

Alex Norris: According to interim figures for the pilot areas in May, 800 people were denied a vote because of ID requirements, yet last year there were only eight reported cases of personation fraud across the whole country. Is not the reality that this is not about protecting our electoral system—it is about voter suppression?

Kevin Foster: If it was so bad, why did the Labour party introduce a system of voter ID in Northern Ireland that has had no noticeable impact on voter turnout? To be clear, this is about securing the ballot, and we look forward to the Electoral Commission's conclusions on the pilots.

Mr Cunningham: Does the Minister not agree that electoral fraud is rare in this country and could be tackled locally? If he thinks that that is how it should be tackled, will he help local government with resources?

Kevin Foster: It is always a pleasure to be asked a question by the hon. Gentleman. We are taking a range of measures to secure the protection of our electoral system, and I do not think that an ID check that originated in the 19th century and that was based on a small percentage of the community—and I must say, men—voting, where everyone was known, is still fit in the 21st century.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Most people would think that voter ID requirements are perfectly reasonable. On the pilots, what steps were taken comprehensively to ensure that people were aware of the requirements?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. A range of work was done locally, supported by the Electoral Commission and the Cabinet Office with councils' consent, to ensure that voters were aware of the requirements. The indications so far are that that has been successful, but of course we will look at the Electoral Commission's independent review before making further decisions on the process.

Candidates with Disabilities

5. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What plans the Government has to encourage more candidates with disabilities to stand for election. [911143]

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): The Government are working with disability organisations to help political parties better support disabled candidates. In December 2018, we launched the £250,000 EnAble fund, providing grants that cover disability-related expenses that people might face when seeking elected office.

Alex Chalk: I have met many talented students with disabilities in Cheltenham from the National Star College, so I commend my right hon. Friend for removing

disability expenses from the electoral spending limits. Surely, that should apply across the United Kingdom. Does he not agree that it should be rolled out to Wales, too?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is, of course, a matter for the Welsh Labour party in the Welsh Assembly. We have taken the view here that excluding disability-related expenses is vital to closing the gap between candidates with disabilities and candidates without disabilities, therefore enhancing equality of opportunity.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In supporting candidates with disabilities to stand in elections, does the Minister not agree that there could be a further benefit? It could result in the voting population of those with disabilities coming to the voting booths in person to vote for disabled or able-bodied candidates.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. It is good for us to ensure we have candidates from all backgrounds and all abilities, with candidates with disabilities having the opportunity to stand. There is a duty on all of us in political parties to do that. I am very proud that the Conservative party has a fund to support candidates who need extra help.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments in answer to this question. Does he agree that we all want to encourage maximum participation to ensure we get the very best candidates to stand and participate in all elections?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is absolutely right, and as I say, it is why I am very proud to be the chairman of a party that has a fund, through the Conservative Foundation, that puts money into supporting candidates in that way. It is for all of us in all political parties to support candidates of all types and abilities to come forward, stand and represent their constituents.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): May I encourage the Minister to look at hidden disabilities, such as fibromyalgia and ME, as well as physical disabilities, to ensure that people with hidden disabilities, which might not be instantly recognisable, are included in the democratic process?

Brandon Lewis: Yes. The hon. Gentleman is right. It is for all of us to ensure we have a holistic approach to make sure nobody is ever left behind and everybody has a chance to reach their full potential.

Cyber-security

7. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations. [911147]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The National Cyber Security Centre provides expert technical advice to Departments and Government contractors, but also to the wider private and public sectors, on how to prevent, detect and recover from cyber-attacks.

Craig Tracey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that, while it is important to ensure we protect the Government from attacks to new systems, we protect legacy systems, too?

Mr Lidington: I completely agree. Whoever leads the next Government, it would be good advice for the relevant Department to take forward a consolidated bid in the next public spending round, so that this issue can be tackled on a cross-Government basis.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Providing national insurance data can be at the root of the difficulties that young people face when registering to vote. Will the Minister identify how Departments can better share data with local councils to help more people exercise their democratic right and still ensure cyber-security?

Mr Lidington: We are looking at the potential reform of the canvassing operation by local authorities to compile the electoral register. As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, there is a fine balance to be struck between the benefits one gets from data sharing between different Government agencies and the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of very sensitive private data.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Today, the Public Accounts Committee found that, incredibly, a third of the funding for the Government's cyber-security strategy has been transferred or loaned to other Government projects and that £69 million of cyber-funding has been taken from the strategy completely. Will the Minister confirm whether that is because the Government do not think our cyber-security is an important priority for them, or whether that is because even national security is not exempt from Tory austerity?

Mr Lidington: What the report shows very clearly is that the cyber-security of this country, and particularly of Government Departments and agencies, has been strengthened since the introduction and implementation of the national cyber-security strategy. The work that the National Cyber Security Centre, in particular, is leading on is helping Government Departments and the private sector alike to keep in touch with the developing and changing nature of the threat and to raise our defences accordingly.

Overseas Electors

8. **Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): What plans he has to change the 15-year time limit on participation by overseas electors in UK elections. [911148]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government are committed to scrapping the arbitrary 15-year rule. We were disappointed that the Overseas Electors Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) did not succeed, but we remain committed to implementing votes for life and are considering the next steps to deliver that.

Sir David Amess: Is my hon. Friend aware that not everyone is enthusiastic about these changes, starting with me? Even though it would affect two of my daughters, who live permanently in America, I cannot for the life

of me understand the justification for these changes. Will he also comment on reciprocal arrangements for non-nationals voting here?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, but I have to disagree with him. I am clear that we need to take the choice that is right for this country and our citizens who live abroad, many of whom have literally fought for this country and still retain very strong emotional connections to it and an interest in its affairs. That is why the Government's view is that the 15-year limit is arbitrary and should be removed.

Government Procurement

9. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What progress the Government have made towards their target of spending 33% of central Government procurement with small and medium-sized enterprises by 2022. [911149]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): We are doing more than ever to encourage SMEs in public procurement. Recently published figures show an increase in spend from the previous year. Examples of measures that we have taken include streamlining procurement processes and improving transparency and, from September, we will be able to exclude suppliers that fail to pay subcontractors on time.

Mr Dhesi: Research from the Federation of Small Businesses shows that 25% of businesses that are in supply chains for public infrastructure projects experience late payment more than half the time. Along with the Government lagging dismally behind their target of spending 33% of central Government procurement with SMEs by 2022, is this not yet more evidence that they simply do not represent the interests of small businesses?

Oliver Dowden: I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would welcome figures that show we are spending more with small businesses than ever before. On his point about prompt payment, we set a very challenging target of 90% of undisputed invoices from SMEs being paid within five days and we are meeting that for most Departments.

Topical Questions

T1. [911169] **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): We are now moving towards the 20th anniversary of devolution in Scotland and Wales and we are making every effort possible to restore devolved Government in Northern Ireland. Under this Government, the devolved Parliaments have been given more powers than ever before, with new powers over income tax, transport and the benefit system, and we have been clear that, when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, a significant number of powers will flow back to those Parliaments. We are committed to upholding the devolution settlements and to strengthening the Union between all parts of the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that the Minister is being accorded the respectful attention that his celebrity status within Her Majesty's Government warrants, and I hope that there can be an improvement on that in the minutes ahead.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Yesterday, during the urgent question, the Government were asked how many names of EU citizens were transmitted from this country to other countries after the 7 May deadline. What is the Government's response to the fact that, under the directive, article 9.4 says that EU citizens shall remain eligible to vote in perpetuity and not have to fill in additional forms?

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The process was exactly the same as for previous European parliamentary elections and I urge the hon. Gentleman to look at the independent review that the Electoral Commission will do following the poll.

T2. [911171] **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What are the Government doing to encourage maximum participation in elections and, in particular, to encourage young people to register to vote?

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): The Government are committed to ensuring that all citizens feel empowered to participate in democracy. In the Cabinet Office, we have delivered projects to promote and encourage participation among young people, including a scheme to recruit and train some 1,000 youth democracy ambassadors. I know that my hon. Friend has personally worked very hard on this issue and I give great credit to him for that, because political parties have a role to play in getting young people involved in politics as well. I am very proud that, in the Conservative party, with his good work, we have seen over 100 new young Conservative branches in just a year.

T6. [911175] **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): We know that the Government have been spending a lot of our money on private polling to find out what the people of Scotland think about their so-called precious Union. Are there any plans for similar polling to find out what the people of Scotland think of the demand that our health service be sacrificed to curry favour with Donald Trump?

Mr Lidington: The Prime Minister could not have been clearer yesterday that the future of the NHS will not be on the table in trade negotiations. The hon. Gentleman would be better advised to focus on the need to improve the declining standards in the Scottish NHS, for which his party is responsible.

T3. [911172] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): A number of former Rugby residents who live abroad, including Claire Nurcombe, who lives in France and who I still represent here, have told me about their wish to retain their voting rights in the UK. The Minister has already referred to the commitment to allow British nationals to retain their voting rights. Can he clarify when that will be delivered?

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend's examples show why an arbitrary 15-year limit is not correct. The Government are considering their options to bring this forward at the earliest opportunity.

T7. [911176] **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Government commit that come the next general election not a single primary school will have to close to be a polling station?

Kevin Foster: Legislation allows returning officers to use schools as polling places to ensure sufficient provision of polling places. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that there needs to be a balance, particularly because we need to find accessible buildings and in some cases schools will be the only ones, but there should be a discussion between returning officers and schools to ensure that the burden of this requirement is not too great.

T4. [911173] **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Is it not time we gave 16 and 17-year-olds the vote so that they are empowered to use their voice?

Kevin Foster: The vast majority of liberal democracies worldwide, including Canada, Australia and New Zealand, consider 18 the right age at which to enfranchise young people. Parliament has debated the question of lowering the voting age in a number of contexts and has repeatedly voted against doing so.

T5. [911174] **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): Last week, Nicola Sturgeon brought forward legislation in the Scottish Parliament for another independence referendum in Holyrood—[*Interruption.*] Clearly much to the delight of SNP Members. But that is despite recent polling showing that fewer than one in five Scots want another independence referendum in the next couple of years. What discussions has the Minister had with representatives of the Scottish Government about these developments? Can he reassure me and the House that the UK Government will continue to uphold the result of the 2014 referendum and say no to this unwanted independence referendum?

Mr Lidington: It was the First Minister herself who said that the 2014 referendum was a once-in-a-generation decision. I believe that we should take her at her word during that referendum campaign and uphold the clear will of the Scottish people as expressed in the 2014 referendum.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): To strengthen the Union, what actions are the Government taking to deliver investment and growth to all four nations of our United Kingdom, especially in places such as Stoke-on-Trent?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right. That is why such measures as the modern industrial strategy and the city deals programme bring benefits to every part of the United Kingdom. As he knows, Stoke-on-Trent has benefited from the transforming cities programme to the tune of more than £5.5 million and from the ultrafast broadband programme by more than £9 million.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) has said, Nicola Sturgeon laid the draft legislation for a second independence referendum last week, but with only one in five Scots supporting what she is doing. Can the Minister assure me that his Department is doing all it can to protect and preserve our United Kingdom, which we are so proud to be part of?

Mr Lidington: The Government believe, and I believe the majority of people in Scotland continue to believe, that all of us are stronger by being proud of being not only Scottish, English, Welsh or Northern Irish, but part of a union of four nations in the United Kingdom.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [911089] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 5 June.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in Portsmouth today, with other world leaders, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-day landings. The commemoration will involve more than 4,000 personnel in D-day events in the United Kingdom and France and representatives of every country that fought alongside the United Kingdom in Operation Overlord—and, appropriately, our former adversaries as well. I am sure that Members in all parts of the House will want to join me in paying tribute to the sacrifice of those who fought to secure the liberty and peace that we enjoy today, and to the courage which made possible the restoration of democracy, human rights and the rule of law to our continent of Europe. I am also sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending our very best wishes to our Muslim constituents here in the United Kingdom, and to Muslims around the world who are celebrating Eid al-Fitr.

I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others earlier today, and I shall have further such meetings later.

Tim Loughton: As my right hon. Friend has said, today in Portsmouth and tomorrow in Normandy, we honour the veterans and the 150,000 British, American, Canadian and other allied troops who led the charge to liberate Europe from the real Nazi scum. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when a minority of hate-fuelled demonstrators yell “Nazi scum” in the faces of American tourists and intimidate others who are legitimately welcoming the visit of the American President, however we may take issue with him—and when, regrettably, they are spurred on by certain hon. Members—they attack the greatest alliance of free nations, and demean the memory of those brave troops and veterans whose sacrifice secured the right of all of us to free speech and lawful protest?

Mr Lidington: I agree with every word that my hon. Friend has just said. It is worth our reminding ourselves that the fact that we and our neighbouring countries across the channel enjoy today the freedom to express our views publicly, to assemble and demonstrate our points of view, and to argue peacefully against one another in this place, is derived from the courage and the sacrifice of the wartime generation, whether from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, or our other allies. We should remember and salute that courage and that sacrifice, and should not demean it by engaging in the sort of disgraceful behaviour to which my hon. Friend has referred.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to step in on behalf of my colleagues today and, indeed, to stand opposite the right hon. Gentleman. I echo his comments about the marking of the 75th anniversary of the D-day landings, which are being commemorated in Portsmouth today. We must never forget the extraordinary sacrifices of all those who landed in Normandy on that day, and the achievements of our servicemen and women who came together to fight fascism and protect our freedom.

I, too, wish a happy Eid al-Fitr to all our Muslim friends throughout the United Kingdom. Let me also express solidarity with all the women who are fighting pension injustice in court and outside Parliament today.

I congratulate both English teams who competed in the Champions League final on Saturday. It pains me, as a Manchester United fan, to congratulate Liverpool on their victory, although—fair play—Liverpool fans did rename “Margaret Thatcher Square” in Madrid “Jeremy Corbyn Square”. I reckon that that deserves brownie points, even from a Man United fan.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister had to repeat to President Trump a journalist’s question about whether the NHS was on the table as part of a United States trade deal. Given that the Prime Minister was silent on the matter, perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will clarify the Government’s position. Will the Tory party give US companies access to the NHS—yes or no?

Mr Lidington: May I first welcome the hon. Lady to these new responsibilities for her and agree with her comments both about D-day and the success of English football teams in the two most recent European finals, and also wish both the English and Scottish women’s elevens well in their forthcoming matches?

I welcome the hon. Lady. I feel slightly sorry for the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), who I have become used to jousting with and who seems to have been dispatched to internal exile somewhere else along the Opposition Front Bench. The hon. Lady perhaps needs to watch out because I think there is a lesson there: anybody who outshines the dear leader at the Dispatch Box risks being airbrushed out of the politburo history at the earliest opportunity.

The Prime Minister has been very clear and she spoke for everyone in the Government and on this side of the House: when it comes to trade negotiations, the NHS is not, and will not be, up for sale.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The right hon. Gentleman is full of the banter today, Mr Speaker.

The President certainly seemed to think the NHS was on the table yesterday. So does the Trade Secretary, but who knows who speaks for the Government at the moment? The Prime Minister did nothing to allay concerns yesterday, so I hope she was more forceful in raising climate change with a President who initiated the US withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, opened up record amounts of land for oil and gas drilling and called climate change a hoax. Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm whether yesterday the Prime Minister made any attempt to convince the President that climate change is in fact real?

Mr Lidington: Yes, the Prime Minister did raise climate change with the President yesterday and she made it clear at their joint press conference yesterday afternoon that she had done that. We are very proud of this country’s commitment to the international agreements to reduce global carbon emissions and we have a better track record in reducing those emissions than any other G7 member state.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The statistics that the right hon. Gentleman referred to relate to emissions cuts since 2010, when the UK benefited from policies put in place by the last Labour Government—policies that have since been dismantled. But how much authority do this Government actually have on this issue? Three current Cabinet Ministers have denied the scientific consensus on climate change, and several of those standing in the Tory leadership contest have close links with organisations and individuals promoting climate denial. It does not bode well. Figures released in April show that the UK is set to miss its own carbon budgets by an ever-widening margin. Would the right hon. Gentleman like to explain why the Government are off track in respect of meeting their own targets?

Mr Lidington: We are not off track in respect of meeting those targets. Since 2010, the United Kingdom has decarbonised our economy faster than any other G7 country. We generate now a record amount of electricity from renewable energy sources and we have just gone through the longest period in our history without relying on electricity generated from coal. That stands starkly against what appears to be the Labour party’s declared policy, which is to reopen the coal mines but not actually to burn the coal that they mine.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Let me be clear: the Labour party does not condone the reopening of any coal mine to be used for energy purposes. Once again, the right hon. Gentleman refers to climate emissions reductions that were implemented using Labour party policy—Labour policies that have since been dismantled. Not only are the Government failing to meet their targets, but last year actually saw the smallest drop in carbon emissions in the last six years: just 2%. At that rate it would take until the end of the century to reach net zero emissions. Just yesterday, the *Financial Times* reported that the Government are accused of trying to “fiddle its emissions figures”, ignoring their official advisers. So let me ask the right hon. Gentleman a simple policy question: the Labour party has committed to banning fracking. Will the Government ban fracking and allow new onshore wind in England—yes or no?

Mr Lidington: What the Government are committed to is to reducing emissions in line with our domestic and global targets. We have not only met but outperformed our first and second carbon budgets, and we are on track towards meeting the third. For some time into the future, there will be a need to use gas as a transitional fuel, but it is much less polluting than other forms of hydrocarbon-based energy and it will therefore be a good source during the transition period while we make ready to move to a completely decarbonised economy.

Rebecca Long Bailey: This is absolutely staggering. The Government promote fracking, which is backed by only 12% of the public, yet they effectively block onshore wind, which is backed by 79% of the public. New solar is down 94% and home insulation is down 98%. Parliament has declared a climate emergency, yet there is no evidence that this Government take it seriously. We need a green industrial revolution to tackle climate change. The Swansea tidal lagoon alone would have required 100,000 tonnes of steel, mainly from Port Talbot, but the Government refused to back it. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us what the Government have actually done to support our steel industry since signing the steel charter?

Mr Lidington: If we look at what is actually happening in the real world, rather than at the ideological tracts that the hon. Lady appears to spend her time reading, we see that there are already about 400,000 jobs in low-carbon businesses and their supply chains throughout the United Kingdom, with scope for much more low-carbon growth to support up to 2 million jobs in the future. We have now received advice from the independent Committee on Climate Change about how to time and to legislate for our transition to a completely decarbonised economy, and we will be bringing forward later this year our decisions on how and when we will be taking that action.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The independent Committee on Climate Change has repeatedly criticised the Government's approach to decarbonising our economy. I note that there was not a single word in the right hon. Gentleman's response on what support the Government will provide for the steel industry, and people from Redcar to Scunthorpe know that his empty rhetoric will not solve their catastrophe. Climate change is an existential threat. To safeguard our future, we will need to mobilise all our resources, just like we did when we rebuilt Britain after the second world war. If we took the challenge seriously, we could create hundreds of thousands of jobs in low-carbon industries, reverse decades of decline in our de-industrialised areas and lead the world in renewable technologies, but the Government are letting us down. They have recklessly run the clock down on Brexit, and is it not the truth that their failure is now running down the clock on our planet?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady asks about Government help for the steel industry. The answer to her question is that we have provided taxpayer-funded subsidies to cut energy costs in the steel industry. We have also supported globally, and introduced here, trade defence measures to shut out unfair competition and the dumping of steel. When I was in Sheffield a few days ago, I talked to specialist steelmakers in South Yorkshire who welcomed this Government's commitment to the advanced

manufacturing centre there and to the work we are doing on technical and vocational training. They were optimistic about the future of steelmaking and manufacturing in this country under the policies that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been taking through.

When I looked at the hon. Lady's video about the Labour party's new commitment to what it terms a green industrial revolution, I saw that it concluded with a focus on words about renationalisation and bringing industries back into public ownership, as if that were the way forward. We know from the CBI that the cost of that would be £176 billion, taken from the pockets of taxpayers throughout the United Kingdom. That money could be used to build 3 million new homes. Those Labour policies would put at risk the finances of decent working families in every part of this country.

Q2. [911090] Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Somerset has been helping to illustrate the huge national challenge that we face in social care through a powerful "Panorama" programme, the final part of which airs tonight. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to all those in caring roles and commit to addressing their funding needs fully?

Mr Lidington: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this important issue. We are committed to ensuring that people of all ages have access to the care and support that they need; that is why we have given local authorities access to nearly £4 billion more for adult social care this year.

However, we recognise that we also need to make sure that best practice is observed across all local authorities and NHS trusts, where the evidence is that delayed discharges are higher in some areas than others. We will be publishing the Green Paper at the earliest opportunity to set out the hard strategic choices that will face the Government, whoever leads the Government in the months to come, and to describe proposals to ensure that the social care system is sustainable over the longer term.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I associate myself and my Scottish National party colleagues with the comments of others. Our thoughts are with the veterans gathered in Portsmouth today to commemorate the anniversary of D-day. Today is also World Environment Day—an important reminder that climate change remains the biggest challenge facing the world. I also wish a very happy Eid Mubarak to all those celebrating across the UK today.

Yesterday, Donald Trump said that the NHS was "on the table" in the trade talks with the UK. Today, he says he is not so sure. This is someone who does not even believe in climate change—a President who simply cannot be trusted. Why, then, are the UK Government so obsessed with pursuing a trade deal that puts Scotland's NHS at risk?

Mr Lidington: The Government are not putting the NHS at risk in Scotland or anywhere else, and the Prime Minister has made that very clear indeed. What I fear is putting standards at risk at the NHS in Scotland is the SNP's obsession with constitutional matters and the referendum rather than focusing on the better delivery of public services.

Kirsty Blackman: We have the best performing NHS in the UK, with the highest number of GPs per head of population. If this week has proven anything, it is that there is no guarantee that our NHS is safe. In 2014, Westminster promised that Scotland's NHS would be in public hands for as long as the people of Scotland wanted that. But now this Tory Government are actively working to deny the Scottish Parliament the powers to safeguard our NHS and protect our public services.

The truth is that, under this Government, Scotland will not have a veto—we may not even have a say. The Scottish Government will never allow our precious NHS to be signed away in a Tory-Trump trade deal. If the Minister and his fellow MPs cannot make that same pledge here today, they will never, ever be forgiven.

Mr Lidington: At the risk of repeating myself, under this Government, and under the stewardship of anyone on the Government Benches, the NHS is not going to be up for grabs in a trade negotiation with the United States or with anybody else at all. When the hon. Lady talks about the need for a voice for Scotland, she ought to have more confidence in the ability of herself and her colleagues to represent the interests of Scotland here in debates and in the Committees on which they sit. At the moment, they are leaving it to my 13 Conservative colleagues to be the true voice of Scotland.

Q4. [911092] Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I know from personal experience what it takes to win a seat from the Labour party, and hold it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that every community in this country needs a strong voice in this place? The people of Peterborough have the opportunity tomorrow to elect Paul Bristow to give them that voice and to replace the failed Labour MP who ended up in jail.

Mr Lidington: I very much endorse what my right hon. Friend says, and I believe that, in Paul Bristow, Peterborough would have a formidable champion for the interests of the residents of every part of that constituency.

Q3. [911091] Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I know the right hon. Gentleman is just a stand-in while the vultures circle, but what does he think of the legacy left by the Prime Minister? This is a deeply divided country in which 14 million people live in poverty, in which 130,000 preventable deaths have been caused by austerity since 2012, in which 17,000 people have died while waiting for disability benefits and in which homelessness is soaring and destitution is rife. A UN rapporteur has described Britain as defined by a "harsh and uncaring ethos." I do not want to personalise this, because everyone on the Government Benches is responsible, but what kind of legacy is that?

Mr Lidington: The legacy of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will be a country in which income inequality is down and wages have been rising faster than inflation for more than a year. We have the lowest unemployment since the 1970s and record numbers of people in jobs. It is about time that the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) stopped talking our country down. On this side of the House, we want to raise our country up.

Q5. [911093] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend think it acceptable that people with access to large sums of money are able to bring about private prosecutions in a way that undermines freedom of speech in this country?

Mr Lidington: Let me say two things. First, I believe that freedom of speech is one of our most precious inheritances from previous generations, and we should do everything we can in this place and outside to uphold that principle. When it comes to any specific case, it would clearly be wrong for me to pass comment on something that is before the courts.

Q7. [911095] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Last weekend my constituency suffered yet more serious violent crime, some in the public domain and some not, including the murder of 18-year-old Fahad Mohamed Nur and a knife attack on the congregation leaving Dar Ul-Isra mosque following Ramadan prayers. Since 2010, under Liberal Democrat and Conservative Governments, South Wales police funding has been cut by nearly £61 million. Police officers in Cardiff are running on empty. What will it take for this shambles of a Government to accept responsibility for public safety and give South Wales police the funding it desperately needs?

Mr Lidington: South Wales police is actually receiving up to £290 million of funding in the current financial year, which is an increase of £19 million on the last financial year. To get to grips with serious crime—no one would have anything but sympathy for the victims to whom she refers and their families—we also need to look at what drives young men in particular, towards gang membership and participation in violent crime. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, in partnership with other Ministers, is now leading that work, which I hope will bring benefits to the hon. Lady's constituency and many others.

Q6. [911094] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The motor industry is vital to the economy of Rugby and the west midlands, so is my right hon. Friend concerned to see that UK manufacturing statistics from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders show that in April production fell by 44% because of factory shutdowns for the expected uncertainty of a 29 March Brexit? Does he agree that this should act as a wake-up call to ensure that the same thing does not happen again on 31 October by leaving the EU with a deal that takes away the uncertainty that is so damaging to our manufacturers?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a very important point; the car industry is one of the most important sectors—but by no means the only one—in this country that relies heavily on just-in-time, cross-border supply chains with enterprises in other member states of the European Union. That is why the Government remain focused on ensuring that our departure from the EU is smooth and orderly, and with a deal that allows for those just-in-time supply chains to be protected.

Q8. [911096] Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Of the many collective challenges we face, none is more essential—more urgent—than climate breakdown. The legislation required to commit the UK

to phasing out carbon emissions entirely by mid-century is simple and has almost certainly been drafted, and this House could pass it in a matter of days. This issue is simply too pressing to wait for later this year or a future Administration. We have the parliamentary time, so what possible reason can the Minister give for why the Government cannot commit to enshrine net zero emissions into law now?

Mr Lidington: May I first congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his partner—I have looked at his Twitter feed—on the imminent birth of their second child later this year? I wish both he and his partner well. On his question, it was this Government who went to the independent Committee on Climate Change to ask for advice about how, and over what timeframe, to make that move to complete decarbonisation. We have only very recently received that advice. It will clearly need to be considered within Government, and we want to bring forward our decision at the earliest possible opportunity, because I share his view of the importance of getting on with this.

Q10. [911098] **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): Difficult times often call for new leadership and a new vision, so will my right hon. Friend join me in supporting Councillor David Greenhalgh's vision for the regeneration of Bolton, his bids to the future high streets fund and the recovery of Bolton, after 40 years of Labour misrule?

Mr Lidington: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this initiative in Bolton. As he knows, high streets are changing, and the Government are committed to helping communities such as Bolton to adapt to that change. We have already set in hand the £675 million future high streets fund, and we welcome Bolton Council's applications, which are being assessed, alongside other applications. We will make an announcement about the places that are successful later this summer, and I know that my hon. Friend will continue to be a very doughty champion for his city.

Q9. [911097] **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): My local NHS is cutting GP hours while it and NHS England are forced to subsidise a private company, Babylon GP at hand, which has sucked up more than 50,000 patients for its controversial app-based system, undermining GPs across London and beyond. Given that the Health Secretary is Babylon's biggest cheerleader, why should my constituents trust this Government to keep the NHS public any more than they would trust Donald Trump?

Mr Lidington: NHS England is, I understand, increasing the baseline funding of the Hammersmith and Fulham clinical commissioning group to ensure that it is not financially disadvantaged by hosting GP at hand. But to improve its service to patients, the NHS is going to need to embrace innovation. Digital technologies such as those used by GP at hand do offer convenience for patients and often allow clinicians to work more efficiently. That is why our new GP contract gives everyone the right to digital first primary care, including web and video consultations from 2021, if that is what they want to receive.

Q11. [911099] **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): Seventy-five years ago tonight, the first steps in the liberation of Europe were taken by the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire

Light Infantry, when they flew by glider to liberate Pegasus bridge. As the Dakotas over Normandy commemorate this feat, will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating and commemorating all the ordinary and yet extraordinary men and women, from every corner of our country, who turned the tide of the war in freedom's favour?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the particular example of Pegasus bridge and the heroism shown by servicemen from our two counties. He is right that today we need to pay tribute to the men and women who took part in the success of Operation Overlord, from whichever part of the United Kingdom or from whichever allied country they came.

Q12. [911100] **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Far too many people in our uniformed public services are taking their own lives, but we do not know the true extent of the tragedies as Ministers do not require the data to be collected. Does the Minister agree that the police, armed forces and prison services should follow the lead of the fire service and record the number of people in their service who take their own lives?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I know that he is due to meet Ministers from the Ministry of Justice fairly soon to talk about whether the MOJ could introduce similar practices for its services; I will draw his question to the attention of the Minister for Policing, to see whether a comparable meeting can be established with the Home Office.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): Petts Wood in the London Borough of Bromley is designated an area of special residential character, but it has suffered from inconsistent decision making at the hands of the unaccountable Planning Inspectorate. Will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to help me to secure the meeting that I have long been requesting but that the Planning Inspectorate has for some reason consistently declined?

Mr Lidington: I am happy, in the first instance, to ensure that my hon. Friend has a meeting with the relevant Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. I hope that that will enable him to find a way forward.

Mr Speaker: It would be a gross discourtesy if it were otherwise. It is extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman should have to ask for a meeting, but there we are. He is going to get his meeting.

Q13. [911101] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The US President said yesterday that the NHS would be on the table in any trade negotiation, and the Prime Minister did not intervene to stop him. The Lib Dems and Tories voted through the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which opened up the NHS to the US market, and 10% of it is already privatised. The Brexit party leader has no issue with US private healthcare insurance replacing our NHS. No party can be trusted with our NHS—except the Labour party. Is Labour now the only hope to save our NHS?

Mr Lidington: One does get a bit sick of these scare stories after a while. The hon. Lady might like to pretend otherwise, but the majority of contracting out to the private sector in the NHS did not take place under a Conservative Administration; it took place under the Labour Government, with Andy Burnham urging that it be accelerated. The truth is that during the NHS's 70-year lifetime, it has had more years under Conservative stewardship than under Labour stewardship. If we look at what is happening today, we see the NHS getting the biggest cash boost ever in its history and a long-term plan for its future, made possible by Conservative policies.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I echo what the Minister said about our teams that are going to the World cup and their performances later this month. This country is further represented by the three match officials who have been selected: Sian Massey and Lisa Rashid from England, and my colleague from Scotland Kylie Cockburn. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating them on the dedication, commitment and ability as match officials that has seen them called up to the World cup, and will he wish all our match officials a successful and productive tournament?

Mr Lidington: I felt that perhaps the shop steward for the amalgamated union of association football officials was speaking then. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Sian, Lisa and Kylie on their having been selected as assistant referees. It is a first-class achievement and I wish them, as well as both teams, all success for the World cup.

Q14. [911103] Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Pupils from St Gregory's Primary School in my constituency recently wrote to me regarding the problem of plastic pollution in our environment. They rightly pointed out the damage that plastic waste causes to marine life and human life as it makes its way up the food chain. As a result, they are calling on the Government to introduce a deposit return scheme that will reduce the amount of plastic that ends up in landfill and in our oceans. On this World Environment Day does the Minister agree with the pupils of St Gregory's Primary School?

Mr Lidington: I think I can give the hon. Lady an encouraging message to take back to the pupils of St Gregory's school, which is that, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, the Government have launched a resources and waste strategy, which includes consulting on plans to introduce consistent recycling for all households, consulting on a deposit return scheme to drive up the recycling of cans and bottles and plans for producers to pay the full cost of managing packaging waste for extended producer responsibility. I think that that makes a good package.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Thirty years ago this week, some 2,000 democrats—maybe more, but we will never know the number—were murdered in Tiananmen Square. Even now in China, a great firewall prevents Wikipedia, Google and others from communicating with the Chinese people. Although China has moved on, does my right hon. Friend not think it the height of

hypocrisy that those who demonstrated against the President of America chose not to demonstrate against the President of China when he came here?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a telling point about the inconsistency in standards among some leading members of this House. It was indeed 30 years yesterday since the tragic and shocking events in which so many people lost their lives while protesting peacefully in and around Tiananmen Square. The sad truth today is that people in China are still unable to exercise their right to protest peacefully—a right given to them by international agreements to which the Chinese Government have signed up. We continue to urge the Chinese Government to respect citizens' freedom of association, assembly, expression and other fundamental rights and freedoms as is supposed to be enshrined in China's constitution as well as in international law.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Plaid Cymru leader Adam Price is commemorating the D-day landings at the Normandy memorial today. We share the feeling for all those people who were involved in that historical event.

I guess that, when President Trump's visit was thought up months ago, the plan was that the UK would have left the EU. "Take back control", they said, but what we saw this week was a vision of things to come: of razzle dazzle concealing the reality of sovereignty reduced to sycophancy. Some 68% of Welsh exports go to the EU. Only 14% of Welsh exports go to the US. Post-Brexit, the British Government will have to choose which deal to strike. Which deal would the Minister prioritise?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Lady had been studying the various publications from the Government, she would have seen that our objective is to have a very close, deep future partnership on trade and other matters with our neighbours in the European Union while, at the same time, having the freedom to pursue trade deals with other parts of the world, including with the United States. I ask the hon. Lady to pause before condemning the state visit by the elected Head of State and Government of our staunchest ally at a time when we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-day landings and trying to criticise that for political purposes. We can disagree with President Trump—any of us is free to do so—but he is here as the elected Head of State of our staunch consistent ally and we should honour and respect him during that visit.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware from his recent visit to Cornwall of the development potential of the space sector there. Therefore, I am sure he will join me in welcoming the announcement yesterday of £7.8 million of Government support for the development of Europe's first horizontal spaceport in Cornwall. Will he also join me in congratulating all the Spaceport Cornwall team on their successful bid? Will he use his offices to ensure that the Government do everything they can to make sure that the regulations are in place to allow satellites to be launched as soon as possible? While he is on his feet, will he congratulate the Cornish rugby team on its excellent win on Sunday against Cheshire to become county champions?

Mr Lidington: I am delighted to congratulate the Cornish rugby team, as my hon. Friend invites me to do. I was also very pleased to see the decision being made to give that support to the Cornwall spaceport initiative. I remember very vividly meeting representatives of the spaceport during my visit to Goonhilly Earth Station earlier this year. There are some really exciting commercial opportunities available for Cornwall and the United Kingdom.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In July 2016, my constituent Mr Goff was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a form of blood cancer. He was treated with two lines of chemotherapy, and he initially responded well, but he had recurrent infections that required antibiotics. He went into remission in 2018, and his personal independence payment was stopped in December 2018. Mr Goff appealed the decision. Despite the fact that he was receiving treatment, his appeal was refused. In February, he was told that his cancer had relapsed—it is incurable. He is now being told that his mobility car will be repossessed this week. Removing his PIP will leave him short of money, unable to get to most of his daily appointments and at risk of infection when travelling on public transport. I appeal to everybody on the Government Benches: show some compassion. Someone intervene and stop this injustice.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I do not know any more about the detail of his constituent's case than what he has just set out before the House. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is in her place on the Front Bench and will have heard what he said. I shall ask her to make sure that a Minister from that Department speaks to the hon. Gentleman urgently to get to the bottom of what has happened.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The National Readership Challenge launches today, and I particularly recommend to colleagues the conclusions on further education in the Government's post-18 education review—to reverse the decline of core spending, to increase the unit funding rate and to allow for three-year funding plans. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that should be essential reading for Treasury Ministers before the autumn spending review and that more funding for further education would be very welcome?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the vital role that further education plays not only in equipping young men and women with the skills they need to give them good career opportunities, but often also in providing a passport to higher education at a later stage in their careers. The Augar review provides a blueprint for how we can make sure that everybody can follow the path that is right for them, and my hon. Friend is right to say that we need to study Augar's conclusions carefully in the run-up to the forthcoming spending review.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Police Scotland prepared a report for the Crown Office on extraordinary rendition flights stopping at Scottish airports. Counter-terrorism officers and the Lord Advocate have made it clear that they require full access to the unredacted Senate intelligence committee report from

the United States Government, who have so far refused to provide it, and that is prohibiting them from determining whether a crime was committed. Given that intelligence sharing is supposed to underpin our relationship with the US, has anyone from the Government raised this issue with President Trump while he has been here? If not, will the right hon. Gentleman pledge to do so on behalf of Scotland's law enforcement agencies before President Trump departs UK soil today?

Mr Lidington: Unsurprisingly, and in line with precedent under all Governments, I am not prepared to discuss security intelligence matters on the Floor of the House, but I will draw the hon. Gentleman's question to the attention of those of my colleagues in the Government who are directly responsible for these areas of policy.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My thoughts today are with my 94-year-old step-father, who has once again returned to Normandy to remember that it was soldiers, sailors and airmen from not only the UK and the US, but our allies—especially those all over the Commonwealth—who fought for our lives. May we use this moment to thank them, to thank those who serve in our armed forces today and to thank our Prime Minister, who, in her last few days in the job, is serving our country with great dignity?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I am sure she will be able to take back to her stepfather a salute from the entire House for his service and that of his comrades in Normandy 75 years ago. I agree with every word she said.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Twelve months ago, the Prime Minister told this House that she wanted a speedy resolution to the funding row between NHS England and Vertex regarding the drug Orkambi to treat cystic fibrosis. My seven-year-old constituent Oliver Ward wrote to the Prime Minister recently asking what progress she has made. Could the Minister please give Oliver some good news and tell him that he need not get up every day worrying about this terrible injustice?

Mr Lidington: I shall ask the Health Secretary or one of his team to contact the hon. Gentleman at the earliest opportunity to try to give Oliver the news that he wishes for.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: May I assume that it relates to matters that cannot wait until after the urgent questions—not because of the fullness of the hon. Gentleman's diary but because the matter appertains to exchanges that have just taken place?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I would say so, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, very good.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Speaking on a day on which we commemorate the freedom of Europe, it came to my attention at the weekend that a fellow member of the Council of Europe—the Georgian state, and especially its Ministry of the Interior—will not provide security

during Pride month to the first ever Pride march through Tbilisi. Given the history of anti-LGBT violence funded by the Russian state in previous years, I wonder, Mr Speaker, how we can convey not only to the Government of Georgia but to its ambassador in the United Kingdom that this House is not only concerned but gravely disappointed by their limitation on human dignity within the Georgian nation.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has partly achieved his objective by the ruse—and I will call it the ruse—of a point of order, which conceivably could have been the substitute for a question that he might have wanted to ask. If that was his objective, he has achieved it. I cannot speak for the House as a whole, but to judge from debates that have taken place in this Chamber in recent years, my strong sense is that his point will have

struck a chord. The idea that such a march should not be able to take place within a safe space, with its participants' physical security underpinned, offends very strongly against our instincts, so I hope that such measures as are necessary to be taken by Georgians will be taken.

More widely, if I heard the hon. Gentleman correctly, he made what struck me as a wholly uncontroversial observation about the record of the Russian state in human rights generally and, more particularly, the protection—or rather the non-protection—of the rights of LGBT people. That is a profoundly unsatisfactory state of affairs, and it is about time it became more civilised in these important matters. *[Interruption.]* It is always good to have the sedentary support of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), and I thank him for what he has said.

Interim NHS People Plan

12.53 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the interim NHS people plan.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The NHS published its interim people plan on Monday, and I laid a written ministerial statement at the earliest opportunity yesterday.

The plan is a first, but critically important, step in ensuring that the NHS has the people, leadership and culture it needs to deliver the NHS long-term plan. The interim people plan has been developed by Baroness Dido Harding, the chair of NHS Improvement, in partnership with frontline staff, NHS employers and a wider range of other representative groups and stakeholders. It takes a tough look at the challenges facing people working across the NHS. It sets out how leaders will be supported to create cultures that empower staff and make sure that every member of staff, regardless of their background, will be able to progress.

Critically, the plan calls for all NHS organisations to set out how they will ensure that the NHS is the best place to work. The recently appointed chief people officer for the NHS will play a vital role in supporting the NHS to do this. The interim people plan sets out a number of practical steps to increase the supply of clinical staff. This includes an extra 5,000 additional clinical placements for nurse training places by September 2019 and a commitment to further expansion of medical school places.

Ultimately, the plan will ensure that the NHS is best able to retain the highly skilled and dedicated staff who choose a career in healthcare, including the most senior clinicians. Therefore, we have listened to their concerns that pension tax changes are discouraging them from doing extra work for patients. That is why Government will consult on how to introduce new flexibilities for this critically important staff group.

But we are not complacent. We know there is more work to do to secure the people, leadership and culture that the NHS needs. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has asked Baroness Harding to lead further work over the summer to prepare the final people plan. As has always been intended, the final people plan will be published soon after the conclusion of the spending review, when there will be further clarity on education and training budgets.

I would like to take this opportunity once again to place on record my thanks, and the thanks, I am sure, of everybody across the whole House, to all the NHS staff who do a wonderful job in ensuring that our constituents—their patients—get excellent care.

Jonathan Ashworth: It is a pleasure, as always, to see the Minister of State, but the Secretary of State should be doing his day job and be here answering questions about the health service, not playing his Tory leadership games.

Our NHS is struggling with vacancies of 100,000. Our NHS staff are the very best in the world—and none of them wants to be part of a trade deal with the

Americans, of course—but they are working under immense pressure because of these chronic shortages. Shortages put patient care at risk, and that means that standards of care are falling. This means that our constituents wait longer to get a GP appointment because we have lost 1,000 GPs. It means that women are turned away from maternity units because we are short of 3,500 midwives. It means that cancer diagnosis is delayed because of shortages in the cancer workforce. As Dido Harding's report shows, we are short of 40,000 nurses in the workforce, and that is now critical. It means that at a time when mental health problems are increasing—*The Lancet* reports today on an increase in non-suicidal self-harm—we have actually lost 5,000 mental health nurses since 2010. We have problems in the learning disability sector. Health Education England today warns that because of the shortages in learning disability nursing, we are set to

“hit critical levels in the next five years”,

with vacancies of 30%. We have an ageing population. Adult social care is short of 110,000 staff, and yet district nursing has been cut by 50%. We do not have enough nurses on our children's wards. Health visitors and school nurses in our communities have been cut.

This NHS workforce crisis is linked to decisions of this Government. As Dido Harding's report says,

“applications for nursing and midwifery courses have fallen since the education funding reforms”.

Those education funding reforms include the abolition of the bursary. Is not that therefore a damning indictment of the decision by this Government to abolish the bursary, and will the Minister now commit to bringing it back?

The report also references continuing professional development, where budgets have again been cut, by a third. It says:

“Employers have...been investing less in their people, as pressures on NHS finances have grown.”

Is that not an admission that Tory austerity, with nine years of underfunding in the NHS, has contributed to the workforce crisis of today?

The Health Secretary has said that he wants “a new Windrush Generation” of overseas nurses to fill the staffing gap, so can the Minister explain why a commitment to recruit 5,000 extra nurses a year internationally was dropped from the Dido Harding report? Did the Government put pressure on Baroness Harding? On international recruitment, can he guarantee that no one offered a job in the NHS or care sector will be restricted by the £30,000 salary cap, as the chair of Health Education England called for yesterday at the Health and Social Care Committee?

Finally, the Minister referenced the spending review. He will have seen that the Chief Secretary said yesterday at a Select Committee that the spending review is now unlikely to be ready for 2020-21. That means that new funding for training, for Health Education England and for capital investment in public health and social care will not come on stream until 2021—two years away. Does the Minister think that that is an acceptable way to deal with the NHS crisis we are facing? I urge the Minister, for whom I have a lot of respect, to accept that we cannot keep delaying this situation further. The Health Secretary needs to abandon his leadership games, focus on his day job and get a grip.

Stephen Hammond: The House will have listened to the hon. Gentleman. It is important to put out some facts, which were missing from his fact-free analysis. For example, we have had 52,000 more professionally qualified clinical staff in the last nine years, almost 16,500 more doctors and over 17,000 more nurses on our wards. He set out a list of promises, but with little detail and no means to pay for them. He asked a number of questions, which I will respond to.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the number of nurses and said that there was no plan. There clearly is. Increasing nursing is a priority, and this plan sets out—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) would like to listen, this plan sets out a focus to ensure that we can recruit nurses. The hon. Gentleman talked about applications, but he will know that applications for nursing places are up 4% on the previous year. He will also know that the plan sets out 5,000 more clinical placements available in September this year, which is a 25% increase on the previous year. He will know that the plan sets out 7,500 more nursing associates. The plan also quite clearly sets out measures that will ensure that the NHS is the best place to work, and therefore more nurses will want to stay in it.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about a number of other issues. The Migration Advisory Committee has made recommendations, which he will have seen. He will know that the Secretary of State has made a firm commitment that we intend to continue to recruit internationally, as well as increasing domestic recruitment. He mentioned continuing professional development. It would be useful if he had read the plan, which sets out commitments to ensure continuing education and opportunities for education for all staff in the NHS. He will have seen that there will be a final level of commitment.

The hon. Gentleman speculates about the spending review. He speculates about a number of things, but it would be better not to speculate. It would also be better not to make allegations about my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who was doing his day job yesterday. I know that the hon. Gentleman is always interested in soundbites, and one soundbite he should have taken notice of was when my right hon. Friend said yesterday: “the NHS is not on the table in any trade talks. The NHS is not a bargaining chip in negotiations, with the US or otherwise.”

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): We’ll see.

Stephen Hammond: Perhaps that is the soundbite that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues—including the hon. Member for Dewsbury, who is shouting across the Chamber yet again—should remember.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s announcement that the Government are giving higher priority still to the recruitment and retention of staff in the NHS. It is an undeniable fact that there are acute shortages, particularly of nurses, in practically every part of the NHS, and we urgently need to improve our recruitment and retention. With that in mind, will he confirm that in finalising the people plan, serious consideration will be given to the immigration rules that will apply to recruitment after we leave the European Union? About one in 20 of the whole staff of the NHS at the moment are citizens of the European Union, and it would make no sense at all to put new restrictions of

any kind on people coming from the European Union who want to make a valuable contribution to our health service. In Nottingham, we used to run recruitment campaigns for nurses in Romania. We are a long way away from being able to in any way put restrictions on staff coming from any part of the continent.

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. and learned Friend the Father of the House is completely correct. We want to make sure it is clear that the EU nationals who work in the national health service—there are more than 63,000 of them—are valued and make a huge contribution to our NHS. He will probably be aware that my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Home Secretary are in continuing negotiations, to ensure that there is no change to that position. I guarantee that we want to see EU nationals continue to work in and contribute to our great health service.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the interim NHS people plan. Workforce is the greatest challenge across all four health services, but the 41,000 nursing vacancies in NHS England are simply a patient safety issue and cannot be parked on some shelf or kicked into the long grass. The plan identifies the removal of the nursing bursary and the imposition of student fees leading to a drop of over 30% in new student nurses. Will the Minister commit to re-establishing the bursary? Scotland preserved the bursary and free tuition, and our nursing vacancy rate is less than half that. The plan also calls for 5,000 new GPs. I remember the former Secretary of State promising 5,000 new GPs by next year, and rather than being close to delivering that, there are 1,000 fewer. How will the Minister deliver 5,000 extra GPs? Will he increase funding to Health Education England to deliver it?

There is no question but that the NHS across the UK will need non-UK staff. How will the Minister attract both EU and non-EU staff when there has been a 90% drop in European nurses coming here, and non-EU doctors are leaving because of visa charges and the £400 a year they pay per member of their family to access NHS services? What is he going to do about the pension tax allowance rules that are driving young consultants out of the NHS?

Stephen Hammond: I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming the plan. I think she will accept that this is a good interim plan; it is a stepping stone. She asks what we are doing to fill nursing places. I point out yet again that we are increasing applications and ensuring that there are 5,000 extra clinical placements available, which is a 25% increase on last year. Far from being complacent about the number of nursing applicants, we are looking to ensure that more nurses can be trained in this country, beyond the 35,000 who are being trained at the moment.

The hon. Lady asked about doctors. The Royal College of Physicians has made it clear that we need more medical school students. We are committed to increasing the number of undergraduate medical school places for domestic students by 1,500, with the first 630 being taken up last year. By 2020, there will be five new medical schools across England, helping to deliver—*[Interruption.]* Of course it takes time, but if we do not take that step now, we will never make the end of that journey. That has been a consistent problem for many

[Stephen Hammond]

years. There are still more doctors coming through now, but we need to do more, which is why this plan is being put in place.

The hon. Lady will have heard me say to my right hon. and learned Friend the Father of the House that there are more than 63,000 EU nationals working in the health service. That is more than there were in December 2017, and over 5,000 more than there were in June 2016. She is right to point out that we want those skills in the right clinical areas. I reiterate what I said a moment ago: we wish to make it absolutely clear that the contribution of EU nationals working in the health service is extraordinary and valued and will continue to be so.

The hon. Lady briefly mentioned pensions. She will have noted that we launched a consultation yesterday, setting out some ideas. I am pleased to say that the British Medical Association has welcomed them but asked us to look at other flexibility within the pension rules. I encourage the hon. Lady and all consultants to take part in that consultation.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The Minister knows from our time together in the Department how much I welcome the interim people plan. It simply is the turnkey without which our long-term plan just cannot work. He is aware of how important retention is, and that is at the heart of the plan. I know he has mentioned this several times already—and consultations are great, and I will encourage my constituents to take part—but may I ask him to look urgently at the changes to the NHS pension scheme in relation to the annual allowance and the lifetime allowance? My trust has contacted me to say that senior consultant doctors and senior nurses are receiving unexpected tax bills of tens of thousands of pounds—up to £50,000—which is starting to have an impact on decisions about their future and the additional sessional work they are prepared to take up. This is impacting on patient care now, so on behalf of my constituents, I urge him—I know he will take this seriously—to look urgently at the NHS pension scheme issue.

Stephen Hammond: Again, my hon. Friend was absolutely right at the start of his question to point out that this is a key stepping stone to making sure that the long-term plan works. He is also absolutely right to point out that we recognise and have taken extraordinarily seriously the difficulties that a number of clinicians have had with the pension tax changes. He will know from his time in the Department that we have been in continuous discussions with the Treasury about what options may be available. I have set out today that the consultation will propose a new 50:50 option for higher-earning clinicians to halve the rate of pension growth in exchange for halving contributions. I accept that that is only one part of the solution, but it is a step forward. I welcome contributions to the consultation, and I urge him and his consultants to take part.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): In our area, GP practices have had serious problems recruiting, and one constituent has contacted me about surgeries being cancelled and having been told that the next routine appointment, for what is actually a serious

condition, will be in August. My constituents cannot wait that long for GP appointments. Frankly, Ministers have had nine years to anticipate this crisis, and instead of making things better, they have in fact made things worse, with the King's Fund warning that GP shortages could treble in the next five years. Frankly, the warm words the Minister has said are not urgent enough and not substantial enough to turn this around, so what is he going to do in the next six months to make a difference to my constituents, who are waiting far too long for important appointments?

Stephen Hammond: The right hon. Lady is right to be angry because her constituents should not be waiting that long. If she wishes to speak to me afterwards, I will take that up directly, with her, on behalf of her constituents.

The right hon. Lady says that we are not taking this seriously and not acting urgently enough. She will know that this interim people plan makes sure we will have not only more people recruited to the NHS, but more people wishing to stay working within the NHS. One of the key issues the NHS has faced is that a lot of people have decided not to work within it, and the key part of the people plan—this being the interim before the final is published later—is actually about ensuring we have more staff there. I reject what the right hon. Lady says. We are taking this seriously, and we are acting on it now.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the record amounts of investment going into the NHS, but may I seek assurances from the Minister that we will be using those resources to ensure that specialist clinicians in areas such as blood cancer and heart disease are properly supported so that we have the training for those personnel to tackle those conditions in particular? I say that as the chairman of the all-party groups on both conditions.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend will know, because I have been in debates with him before, that I recognise the exceptional work that those two all-party groups do. He will know from the long-term plan that we have set out new commitments on diagnosis for all cancers and for cardiac. He will know that the reason why we have set out an interim people plan and will then set out a final people plan is that a long-term plan cannot work unless we have the people to back it up and are training the right number of people. This plan sets out how to recruit more people, how to train more people, how to give people the skills to deal with what will face the clinicians and the physicians of the 21st century, and that is key to delivering what he has asked for.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Baroness Harding, who is a Conservative peer, and Sir David Behan, the head of Health Education England, told the Health Committee yesterday in absolutely clear terms that both the abolition of nursing bursaries and Brexit are seriously exacerbating the staffing crisis in the NHS. Are they wrong?

Stephen Hammond: I am sure they will also have said that one of the things Health Education England has explicitly set out is that one of the biggest barriers to more nurses was that there was not the placement capacity. I am sure Sir David Behan will also have set

out that he therefore welcomes entirely the 5,000 extra clinical placements that are being made available, which is a 25% increase on last year.

The right hon. Gentleman will also know, as I have set out, that there are more EU nationals working in the NHS now than there were at the time of the referendum. However, one of the reasons why we are having an interim people plan is that we are not complacent. There are huge challenges, as I set out not only in my written ministerial statement, but in my opening remarks. That is why this plan is addressing the shortages in nursing, and it is right that we do so.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I welcome very much this initiative, and I am delighted by all that has been said. The chief executive officer of Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital announced his departure on Monday, following a catalogue of failings. Despite these failings, formal complaints to Dido Harding and others and a series of calls for his dismissal, the CEO has apparently resigned of his own volition to take up another highly paid job within the NHS and is not going to work his notice because he has too much holiday to take. Does the Minister agree that senior management in any organisation, including the NHS, must be held to account for their performance, and will the people plan deliver this?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful statement on behalf of her constituents about the change of leadership. I am obviously aware of the change of leadership, including the departure of the chief executive, and I am aware that it raises a number of issues, which she and I may wish to have a meeting to discuss. She is right to ask whether we are tackling the culture to make sure that we have the best leaders in the NHS, whether we are ensuring that they are properly trained for the challenges of the 21st century and whether we are making sure that they are not only held accountable but supported to make sure they are doing the best they can. That is why Sir David Behan led a chapter in the whole draft people plan, which will lead into the final people plan, on leadership. The right leadership for the NHS will make sure that our constituents get better care.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It has been reported this week that there has been a dramatic rise in self-harm, with one in five girls cutting, burning or poisoning themselves. Despite this, the NHS trust in my constituency has cut the Lewisham child and adolescent mental health services budget, due to central Government cuts. We desperately need more funding and more staff. Given that the Government are not on track to meet their mental health workforce target for 2020-21, is the Minister really confident that we can meet these new, larger recruitment targets?

Stephen Hammond: I am confident that we are putting in place the measures that will allow those targets to be met. There is a comprehensive expansion of mental health services, with an additional £2.3 billion being invested over the next four years, which will make sure we resolve the problems the hon. Lady has highlighted. In particular, 350,000 more children will get the support they need, which I am sure will translate into dealing with the issues at local level that she has raised.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): GP retention is a significant challenge in my constituency, and GPs do often raise the impact of the current pension system. May I say to my hon. Friend that I very much welcome the consultation on pension arrangements for clinicians, but can he set out the potential timing of when those changes may come into force? He will be aware that GPs are making decisions right now about things such as early retirement, and we need this as a matter of urgency.

Stephen Hammond: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Department will launch the consultation at the end of this month. It will set out the proposals, which we spoke about yesterday, to introduce greater pension flexibility. They are designed to take away the disincentives not only for senior clinicians but clearly for GPs. That consultation will last for the normal length of time, and I hope we will be able to proceed quickly thereafter.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): When I came to Parliament 35 years ago, I had served for three years on the royal commission on the NHS. We made many recommendations. When I hear the Minister talk about things that will be done and say that notice has been taken of reports, I am reminded that that report landed on Margaret Thatcher's desk. The recommendations that we made were never carried out. One was about the shortage of doctors. Thirty-five years ago, we knew that there would be a shortage of doctors. We made many other important points, which should have been acted on. What assurances can the Minister give so that on this occasion the recommendations in the report will be acted on? What is the point of all these words and all this work done by people on things such as royal commissions unless the Government take action?

Stephen Hammond: The Government are taking action specifically on the points that the right hon. Lady made. We committed to increase the number of undergraduate medical school places by 1,500, and 630 are already in place.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for grappling with the NHS pension scheme issue. I am not convinced that the 50:50 option is a long-term, sustainable option, so will he confirm, as the Secretary of State said yesterday, that the consultation will be open to exploring other mechanisms? In particular, will he keep banging at the Treasury's door, because the ultimate solution is in its power? The way in which it has tried to dodge this and pass it to the Department of Health and Social Care is a bit of disgrace.

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. Friend—I am sorry, my hon. Friend; I am only presaging something that will happen in future—will know that when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State speaks he says what he means. The consultation will be open to looking at other schemes and other potential flexibility. My hon. Friend will know that the British Medical Association has welcomed the 50:50 option but would like to see other options. He will also know, much as the Department might like to make tax policy, we do not do so, so it

[Stephen Hammond]

would be injudicious of me to commit, but I am happy to continue our long-standing conversations with the Treasury on this matter.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): There will be no people plan if Donald Trump gets his hands on our NHS. Unlike Donald Trump, the NHS does not discriminate, and staff value everyone who walks through the door as equal. Does the Minister agree that the NHS was not for sale yesterday, it is not for sale today, and it must not be for sale tomorrow?

Stephen Hammond: The good news is that I think the hon. Lady was agreeing with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who set that out yesterday. I welcome the fact that she supports him.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The fishing village of Mevagissey risks losing its GP surgery because the last remaining doctor there has handed the contract back to the NHS. The people of Mevagissey have launched an incredible campaign to find a new GP for their village. Does the Minister support their campaign, and will he spread the message far and wide that there is an amazing community waiting for a new GP and that all expressions of interest are welcome? Can he reassure me that the new people plan contains measures not only to recruit more doctors but to ensure that rural and coastal communities can find the GPs they desperately need?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right, and I am happy to support the campaign by the people of Mevagissey, which is a wonderful part of the country to live in. I am happy, too, to assist him in that campaign if he wishes to come and speak to me about it. He is right that the plan sets out ways to recruit and retain more doctors, including GPs in rural and coastal locations, as well as those in urban locations.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Would the Minister join me, first, in congratulating the Royal College of Nursing on backing a people's vote? Does he accept that one reason for that was doubtless that the number of nurses and midwives from the EU has dropped by 5,000 in the past two years? Will he set out what extra cost and complexity will be associated with the recruitment of nurses and midwives from the European Union, if indeed we leave the EU, in future?

Stephen Hammond: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating the RCN—

Tom Brake: The hon. Lady?

Stephen Hammond: I am sorry, I wholeheartedly apologise to the right hon. Gentleman. I certainly join him in welcoming the RCN's welcome for a people plan. It is a great and sensible step forward, without being complacent about what needs to be done in the next phase, which will be published later in the year. He will know that we have been working with other EU members to ensure that, after what I hope is an orderly Brexit, there is continued recognition of medical qualifications. He will know that the European Commission has already

set out its desire for a wide-ranging, extensive reciprocal healthcare agreement, and the Government continue to work to achieve that ambition.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I do not think that the Minister is taking this seriously. In the past two years, 5,000 nurses and midwives from EU countries have left the NHS, at a time when we are 40,000 nurses short. Does he agree with David Behan, the chair of Health Education England, who agreed yesterday that Brexit was exacerbating the NHS staffing crisis?

Stephen Hammond: I have already set out the fact that the Department, the whole NHS management, the whole NHS, and we as a country welcome and recognise the huge contribution of EU nationals in the NHS. I have set out our desire to continue to ensure that EU nationals work in the NHS. Alongside that, I know that Sir David Behan will have also said to the hon. Gentleman that it is important that we have more routes into nursing to ensure that those 40,000 vacancies that he discussed do not continue, which is why we have set out in the plan more nursing apprenticeships, more nursing associates and more clinical placements. It is important to have both international and domestic recruitment.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has talked a lot about leadership. He said in his opening statement that there was a need to create in the NHS leaders who could create cultures that empowered staff. What is he going to do about the bullying at the top of the NHS, including in NHS England and NHS Improvement, which Dido Harding admitted yesterday at the Health Committee?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady is right: that culture is not acceptable and must be driven out. She will have read the interim people plan, which talks explicitly about ensuring that we create leadership that stops that culture. There is a chapter on making the NHS the best place to work. She will know that we have been working across the country to ensure that all staff know that they are valued, that they have the right to speak up and that the culture of bullying must be driven out. I shall speak with Baroness Harding, as I do regularly, to ensure that that message is spread throughout the NHS and that staff know that they are valued.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I realise that health is devolved to the Scottish Government. Nevertheless it has to be said that the Scottish Government are having enormous trouble with their workforce planning, which means that doctors and nurses have to pick up the slack and that we are wasting good money on employing agency staff, which need not happen. May I make a plea to Her Majesty's Government to share workforce planning and best practice with the Scottish Government so that they can get that right?

Stephen Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, health matters in Scotland are devolved, but I am delighted to share any of the excellent initiatives that are set out in the draft people plan with the Scottish Government.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Despite the vital role played by carers in society, they merit just a paragraph in the plan. Will the Minister ensure that his Department matches Labour's commitment to publish a full strategy for carers and to increase carer's allowance to the same rate as jobseeker's allowance?

Stephen Hammond: I welcome Labour's commitment to publish a paper, but the hon. Lady will know that the Department is going to publish a Green Paper on adult social care. We are finalising that. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) shouts at me. I know he makes a lot of promises without detail. We want to make promises that have detail and can work.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): This is an important report into NHS people planning. It is an interim report, so there is an opportunity to identify any deficiencies. My particular concern is about the cancer workforce, in particular the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South about the loss of bursaries not just for nurses but for therapeutic radiographers. May I draw the attention of the Minister, with due respect, to the fact that the radiotherapy and oncology course at Portsmouth University recently closed? Concerns are being expressed and not just by politicians on the Opposition Benches. Mr Richard Evans, chief executive of the Society of Radiographers, said that he has concerns about whether our hospitals and specialist cancer centres will be able to recruit enough skilled and trained personnel. This could even threaten the delivery of cancer treatment and the ambitious plans that the Minister has in the new cancer strategy.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right: this is a serious plan. As he rightly points out, it is an interim plan. It sets out a number of specific actions for this year. It also sets out a number of clear action paths and trajectories to ensure that the people plan is achieved. I would be delighted to meet him and other officers of the all-party group to ensure that we get the skills in the right places to ensure that the ambitious and deliverable plans in the long-term plan can happen.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I raised the cost of the Babylon GP at Hand app and the cuts in the number of conventional GPs at Prime Minister's questions but, with respect to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, he missed the point, astonishingly. Even if NHS England funds £21 million of the shortfall for this year, that is still money from the public purse and it does not address the past cost to Hammersmith and Fulham of at least £12 million or any future costs. Will the Government suspend the Babylon contract while there is a proper investigation into this privatisation of the NHS?

Stephen Hammond: It is not a privatisation of the NHS; it is a scheme allowing greater access to GP services. The hon. Gentleman will know that it is delivering healthcare to a number of his constituents as well.

Sure Start: IFS Report

1.32 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent question*): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on the Institute for Fiscal Studies report on Sure Start children's centres.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): The Government very much welcome the recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies on the effects of Sure Start. It is crucial that, in our pursuit of better outcomes for children and families and in making spending decisions, we are guided by high-quality evidence. The report gives us more of that.

The report shows very clearly that children in disadvantaged areas benefit most from services. Indeed, those in the richest 30% of neighbourhoods saw practically no impact at all. The policy framework we have in place reflects that evidence. In 2013, the Government introduced a new core purpose for children's centres, focusing on families in the greatest need of support. While we have seen local authorities remodel services, there are now more children's centres than at any other time prior to 2008—in fact, since Tony Blair was Prime Minister. This is at a time when the Government are making record investment in childcare, with more than 700,000 of the most disadvantaged two-year olds having benefited from 15 hours' free childcare since its introduction in 2013. In addition, under the Government's healthy child programme, children and families now receive five mandatory health visitor checks in the early years. The statutory framework also contains important protections so that outcomes for children and families, particularly the most disadvantaged, will not be adversely affected by the proposed changes to children's centre provision.

The IFS concludes that policy makers must

“consider which types of services and models of provision can most effectively help this group”.

The Government agree. Indeed, we already have work under way to do exactly that. As part of our £8.5 million early years local government programme, we announced in April that the Early Intervention Foundation will look at children's centres and other delivery models to find out what works well, so that local authorities have more evidence to help them to continue to make the best decisions for their communities.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Minister for her reply, but I think it bears little relation to reality.

Sure Start is a proud Labour legacy. It has a proven track record of transforming lives, yet it has been allowed to wither on the vine by this Government. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, in its significant report yesterday, highlighted that austerity has hit Sure Start hard, with budgets falling by two thirds. We have seen over 1,000 centres close since 2010. The report also shows that Sure Start saved the NHS millions of pounds by significantly reducing hospitalisation of children, especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a clear lesson here for Government: investment in early intervention saves money later on. Closing Sure Start centres is a false economy.

[Lucy Powell]

Will the Minister use the report as ammunition, with the Tory leadership contenders and the Treasury ahead of the spending review, for a new commitment to revitalise Sure Start? What is happening to the Government's review on the first 1,001 critical days, which was led by the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)? I pay tribute to her work and her focus on this issue. Will the review be published before we get a new Prime Minister—I understand that it was ready to go—and will renewing Sure Start be central to its recommendations? Will the Government match Labour's commitment to save Sure Start and invest £500 million in resurrecting it? Given the clear benefits of children's centres in creating social mobility, will she properly fund local authorities so that they can do everything possible to keep children's centres open?

The decimation of Sure Start has been a travesty. It flies in the face of all the evidence that early intervention is key to tackling disadvantage. It must be reversed.

Anne Milton: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady. This has been a passion of hers and she has worked very hard across the House to gain support. She is absolutely right that investment in early intervention is important. I should point out that, in the first paragraph of the executive summary, the report makes it clear that

“the UK is now one of the highest spenders on the under-5s in Europe”.

Those are OECD figures from 2014. I would just say to her that what matters is to have a universal offer, but it is also about the way services are delivered. That is not necessarily always most effective through centres. They definitely have a role, but it is about services and making sure that we get the services to those who need them the most.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), a member of the Education Committee, on her urgent question. In Essex, we have an extraordinary family hub that the Children's Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), has visited. It is a one-stop shop for mentoring, health support, education support and counselling services. Our manifesto commitment was to have family hubs across the country. Will my right hon. Friend commit to having such hubs and roll them out across the United Kingdom?

Anne Milton: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments and congratulate Essex on its work on its family hubs. The point he makes is important. It is not just about one-stop shops; it is also about ensuring that, for families who never go near family hubs or children's centres, we can deliver services in their own homes. On the quality of children's centres, in 2010, 68% of early years providers were good or outstanding. Today, the figure is 95%. On outcomes, in 2013, 52% of children left reception with a good level of development. Today, 72% of children do so. It is about making sure that we get the services that are appropriate for a local area to those who need them the most.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for asking it.

The IFS report showed that Sure Start reduces the hospital admissions gap between rich and poor children by half. Put simply, thousands of children are ending up in hospital because of cuts to Sure Start. Sure Start was the jewel in the crown of the Labour Government, and politicians, policy makers and the public have long understood its benefits. Even back in 2010, the Conservative party pledged to recruit 4,200 Sure Start health visitors for exactly that reason. It was a Conservative election manifesto promise, but what is the reality? A cut of two thirds in funding and over 1,000 Sure Start and children's centres have been lost since 2010.

Will the Minister join me in welcoming the report and commit to responding in detail to each of its recommendations before the summer recess? However, it should not be the IFS that marks the Government's homework. In 2015, the then Conservative Government promised a consultation on Sure Start, but nothing has materialised. When will that work be completed and will the Minister commit to a publication deadline today? At a time when NHS budgets are stretched, should we not be investing in preventive measures such as Sure Start to keep children from ending up in hospital? Will she make that point forcefully in the spending review?

Tory leadership candidates are scrambling over themselves to make pledges to reverse their cuts, but if they are genuinely serious about social justice, now is the time to show that by pledging to reverse the scandalous cuts they have made to Sure Start.

Anne Milton: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Being fixed in a dogmatic way on Sure Start children's centres is not necessarily—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps she will let me finish. It is important that anything we do is evidence-based. As the report makes clear, statistically the IFS cannot necessarily be confident that the effects that it highlighted on hospitalisation are not due to chance. We need to make sure that we get the right services in the right place, in the right setting, for the families who need them most. Public Health England is currently looking at the healthy child programme, which is 10 years old. It wants to modernise that, focusing it on the first 1,000 days, and she has been involved in that. Looking at the team around the child and at solutions to make sure that vulnerable children and families get the help they need means that we need universal reach and a targeted response where it is needed most.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for her excellent and long-standing work on early years, and I very much enjoy being a member of the Education Committee alongside her. With increasing numbers of children being taken into care, what is the Minister doing to help the most vulnerable families to stay safely together?

Anne Milton: It is important that families who can stay safely together—the critical word is “safely”—are supported to do so. A number of initiatives are going

on: I talked about Public Health England looking at the health child programme and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is looking at home learning environments. There are a number of initiatives and this involves children's services, education and the NHS all working together—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) is shaking her head. If she thinks differently, she should say so, but this will not be solved, and families who need help will not be helped unless we have an integrated approach to make sure that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) said, families can stay safely together.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on securing this really important urgent question, and I enjoy working with her on the Education Committee. As the former head of a school with a phase 1 Sure Start, I welcome the recent IFS report, which acknowledges the life-changing work that Sure Start centres deliver for the most vulnerable families in our most deprived areas. Can we have a guarantee that there will be a full commitment and funding from the Government to Sure Start centres and early intervention projects now and in future?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady has a wealth of experience in this field. I can guarantee that our interventions will be evidence-based, which is the critical thing. She talks about cuts, but as the IFS report states, the UK is now one of the highest spenders on the under-fives in Europe, so we are spending money. What matters is making sure that we get the help to those who need it most.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on raising this incredibly important issue. The Minister talks rightly about evidence-based decision making. The evidence shows that in recent years, there has been a 17% increase in the number of children being taken into care and that the reduction in funding for Sure Start centres is a contributory factor. Some 655,000 referrals to children's services—[*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State is muttering from a sedentary position that that is not backed up, but the correlation is very clear for all to see. It is both tragic and expensive to reduce funding for Sure Start centres, leading to the need for much more drastic and tragic intervention later. In rural communities such as mine, parents have to travel much further to a Sure Start centre. Will the Government commit to capital funding, so that local authorities can co-locate libraries, children's centres and Sure Start centres so that they can keep performing?

Anne Milton: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that correlation and causation are not the same thing. The IFS report, which we have very much welcomed, is cautious in making that distinction. The important thing is that we can build children's Sure Start centres in his constituency, which, as he says, is very rural, but what has always mattered to me—I am a former Public Health Minister—is this: what about the families who do not go there?

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): On the eve of the election in 2010, David Cameron, who became Prime Minister, promised that

Sure Start would be safe in his hands, yet here we are nine years later and over 1,000 Sure Start centres have closed, the rest have been hollowed out and two thirds of the budget has gone, and still the IFS has said that they are doing some powerful work with the poorest in our communities. Like me, does the Minister wonder what amazing achievements there could have been from these centres if they had not been decimated and savagely cut in the way that they were?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady has always been a champion of early years in all the work that she has done. It is not just the budget spent on Sure Start centres that matters; it is the budget coming in, and the visits from health visitors, which are so crucial—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady is shaking her head. It is not just that budget. As the report makes clear, we are the highest spender in Europe. What matters is the universal offer and making sure that we target the support to those who need it most and possibly to families who are not attending the centres—what about them?

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I invite the Minister to come to my constituency and see the communities that were being served by the five Sure Starts that were closed. She can see whether they were the best off in the country—I think she will find that they were not. Surely she understands that there is a connection between those closures and the 30% increase in the number of children going into care in County Durham.

Anne Milton: I am going to sound very repetitive, but this needs to be evidence-based. Sure Start centres—[*Interruption.*] Read the IFS report and read the wealth of evidence out there. This is part of the problem, but I think the hon. Lady will find that there are more places giving 15 hours free childcare than there ever were Sure Start centres.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have some sympathy for the Minister, only because the evidence she is not looking at is the evidence she can do little about—the fact that the dramatic cuts from the Treasury to these services and to local authorities have resulted in many local authorities, very reluctantly, having to close children's services. She says she does not think the model works, but the evidence shows that investment in early years is the best investment we can make. Without it, we have to make good the damage later on. I suggest that she ask parents whether they are satisfied with the present level of support. The evidence suggests that they will say no.

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty champion of all things to do with education. As the Minister responsible for post-16 education not at university, I see the results of children having suffered from poor educational backgrounds and possibly insufficient family support. He mentioned the word “model”. That is the key. It is not one model we need to reach the most vulnerable families. I point again to the 700,000 of the most disadvantaged two-year-olds who have benefited from the entitlement to 15 hours free early-years education

[Anne Milton]

a week. This is an important addition to what else is being done. There is no one model that works in this area.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): When I held a summit on parental loneliness in my constituency, the local children's centres made clear the vital role they played in supporting local families—often some of the most vulnerable. Despite this, 12 of the Sure Start centres in Bromley have closed since 2010. The Minister talks about universal reach, but with only six centres left in the entire Borough of Bromley—a huge London borough—and with our health visiting services cut, does she not recognise that universal reach is impossible without significant investment and an end to austerity?

Anne Milton: I can only refer the hon. Lady to the report that states that we are the highest-spending nation in the OECD. It is very easy for Opposition Members to throw the word “austerity” around without looking at the evidence or the other models available. She is fixated on a centre. What about the families and mothers who are too depressed to go there? I am saying we need good—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Anne Milton: We need a variety of models of care and we will be led by the evidence.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): This is becoming a very frustrating exchange. On the one hand, the Minister, who I respect greatly and work with and who we know cares, is saying that this is about families in the greatest need, but on the other hand, she is saying, “What about the families who don't go there?” My experience in Bristol stems from when this started. I was brought in to help join up the provision on education, early years and health services. They did not work well together, so we supported measures to tackle health inequalities—measures on family things such as parenting, mental health, domestic violence, cooking, nutrition, and so on. We did that through outreach to the families who would not normally come and by supporting families in the greatest need. What we are losing now is that universality principle and the point about how it actually works—that is where the evidence is. This is a frustrating exchange because the evidence is there. If she can tell us what the Government seek to replace the model with and help us to understand those outcomes, perhaps we can have a more productive exchange for the benefit of all those families who need this provision.

Anne Milton: I agree 100% with the hon. Lady. In some ways, these discussions should be more consensual given that we all want the same ends. I must repeat that there are more children's centres now than at any time when Tony Blair was Prime Minister. It is not just about having centres either. In 2010, 68% of early years providers were good or outstanding and now 95% are. The presence of a centre in itself does not necessarily answer the question. Similarly, in 2013, 52% of children left reception with a good level of development; today, that figure is 72%. That is a marked increase. It is about the quality of care as much as the presence of a centre. I go back to

what I said to the hon. Member for Batley and Spenningsdale: sticking in a dogmatic way to one thing will not work. We have improved quality, which is critical, and it is important that we are led by the evidence, including the IFS report, which—I say for a third time—I very much welcome. It is one of many things. The work that Public Health England is doing on modernising the healthy child programme is also critical to ensuring universal reach and a targeted response, but so too is looking at the team around the family.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), I visited a lot of Sure Start centres in my capacity as a domestic violence practitioner and helped them with their work. We are talking about a woman's ability to walk into a centre, without any stigma and without anyone knowing why she is there, and get help not just with childcare but with the domestic violence she is suffering, her mental health problems, and so on, and all that in her locality from people she trusts. What is it about that that the Minister seems to object to—in, I have to say, quite a dogmatic way?

Anne Milton: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her work at the domestic violence centre, and she is absolutely right: women—and men, because sometimes men suffer from domestic violence—need to feel free to go to some place where they feel they can report their situation. I do not have a dogmatic objection. This is the problem with our debate. We want the same ends. I am saying only that no silver bullet answers the question we all want answered by ensuring both sufficient universal support and a targeted approach.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Since 2012, all five Sure Start centres in my constituency, serving the most disadvantaged areas, have closed, with devastating impacts on early years interventions in those areas. The Minister needs to visit Durham to understand that Sure Start's multi-agency approach and access to a wide range of services has not been replaced by other services largely because of cuts to local authorities. Will she commit to coming to Durham, will she carry out a complete review of early years provision and children's services and ensure it is funded properly, and will she agree to ring-fence money for Sure Start?

Anne Milton: I thank the hon. Lady for her invitation. I am not the Minister responsible for this policy area, but I will make sure that her invitation is passed to the Minister who is responsible, and I am sure that at the earliest possible opportunity he will come to Durham to see the evidence on the ground. As she said, one needs to see what it has been replaced with. I am not sure what the provision of the free childcare entitlement for two-year-olds is like in her area, but it will be important to look at that as well to see what benefit it is giving to families who might otherwise have gone to the children's centre.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I remember a conversation with a constituent who said her Sure Start centre literally saved her life. She was suffering from post-natal depression but she went to the centre and spoke to other mums and dads, and it was they who

convinced her that she needed professional help. Unfortunately, that Sure Start centre has now closed, along with more than half of the Sure Start centres in Kirklees, owing to savage Government cuts. Will the Minister publish figures for the number of designated centres across the country so that we can know exactly what damage has been done and—crucially—will she demand that the new Prime Minister undo that damage by reversing the cuts in full?

Anne Milton: The right hon. Lady raises an important issue—she is the first to have specifically raised it—and that is maternal mental health, which is a significant problem for many and is not limited to those from disadvantaged areas. I think that is important. Paternal mental health is now getting slightly more attention than previously. I cannot comment on Kirklees specifically, but if there is any information that we can send her, I will make sure she receives it.

Mr Speaker: With typical generosity, the Minister has elevated the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) to membership of the Privy Council. As far as I can discern or guess, it can only be a matter of time.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): One of the great successes of Sure Start was that it reached out to rural areas. We saw that particularly in Dursley and the Top of Town in Stroud. The problem with the cuts is that they have come along with other cuts in, for instance, the number of health visitors. All the increases that were put in place by the Government post-2010 have gone. We also see all sorts of problems in the private and voluntary sectors. Will the Minister agree at least to look at the impact on rural areas? There may not appear to be great areas of deprivation, but to people in those areas who are suffering as a result of deprivation, this matters just as much.

Anne Milton: Perhaps, Mr Speaker, that was because I believe that all women should be Privy Counsellors. They are very under-represented on the Privy Council.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about rurality. As I said at the outset—and I did not make the comment flippantly—we will ensure that all that we do is evidence-based, and that our evidence is robust.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Has the Minister any plans to look into the impact of centres providing early-years support on reducing youth violence? I ask because last year the cross-party Youth Violence Commission published a report that, as well as suggesting we should take a public health approach to tackling youth violence, said that early childhood centres should be revitalised.

The Minister refers to the need for evidence. Our report was written in partnership with Warwick University, and a great many academics gave evidence, including a representative of the Open University. Edward Melhuish is one of the leading academics analysing the impacts of Sure Start and early childhood centres. Will the Minister agree to read our report and respond to it, and will she also look into the material published by Edward Melhuish on Sure Start and early childhood centres?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady rightly raises the issue of youth violence, which is behind much of the work done by Members on the first 1,000 years. [HON. MEMBERS: “1,000 days.”] I mean 1,000 days. “The First 1000 days of life” is based on the premise that many life chances are set in those early years. I think that both the Department of Health’s healthy child programme and our Secretary of State’s focus on improving home learning, particularly family learning, are important. However, I shall be delighted to look at Edward Melhuish’s report when I am able to do so.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I was Hounslow’s Cabinet lead for children and young people when the Tories, who were in opposition in this place, shifted their view and came round to fully supporting the Labour Government’s roll-out of universal Sure Start provision as a multi-agency service. They did so because of the vast body of credible evidence of the real benefits provided by fully funded Sure Start centres, not just in health and mental health—which are covered in the IFS’s report—but in, for instance, social mobility, educational outcomes, and the provision of domestic violence services. Where is the evidence that informs the Government’s change of policy, as a result of which Sure Start centres are withering on the vine—or is the Minister struggling to justify it in the light of the effects of Government austerity on her Department?

Anne Milton: No. Let me remind the hon. Lady that the report makes it clear that we are one of the highest spenders on early years—[*Interruption.*] It is in the report, on the first paragraph of the executive summary.

I can only reiterate that, while words like “austerity” can be thrown around, this is about the money we are putting into, for example, the free childcare entitlement. It all matters. It all goes towards giving young families and children the early years support they need.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): With all due respect to the Minister, she has misrepresented the research, which showed that universal, multi-functional services—not residualised services—had a positive relationship with outcomes for disadvantaged children. In my city of Oxford, children’s centres are anything but that: they are just shells for private or voluntary services, or for residualised services such as contact centres or social services. The access is not there.

The Minister keeps talking about health visitors. Is she aware that under her Government the proportion of children receiving those visits at the right time is appallingly low in many parts of the country? Is she aware that it has fallen under her Government?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady refers to universal, multi-functional services, and to health visitors. There are five statutory health visits. Well over 90% of contacts are made with children in the first few months of their lives, and 80% are made with those aged between two and two and a half. I think that that is welcome, but we always need to know what underlies such figures. I know that Public Health England is looking at the healthy child programme, and I am sure that it will look at those figures as well.

Points of Order

2.6 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier today, the Minister for the Cabinet Office may have accidentally said, in response to a question about the UK's carbon budgets, "We are not off track" to meeting those targets at all. The Government's official adviser on climate change, the Committee on Climate Change, has reported that the UK is off track to meeting its fourth and fifth carbon budgets, and official statistics published by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have also shown that it is off track. It is therefore a matter of established fact that the UK is off track to meeting its targets. Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, on how we can correct the record?

Mr Speaker: I think that the hon. Lady has done so very successfully, not least to her own satisfaction. The observation that she has just made will be faithfully recorded in the *Official Report*, which she may choose to disseminate more widely, possibly in her own constituency or beyond. I hope that she will go about her business with an additional glint in her eye and spring in her step in the knowledge that she has taken early action to put the record straight, as she sees it.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, of which I have given notice both to you and to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson).

Last week, on the BBC's "Question Time" programme, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said that 80% of school leavers in Bearsden, in her constituency, went to university, and claimed that only 4% of school leavers in Govan did so. That has caused much consternation and offence in Govan, and it has been discussed by various organisations there, including Govan Community Council. As you would expect, Mr Speaker, I have written to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, which has advised me that the

"statistics quoted on Question Time relate to the Govan and Linthouse intermediate zone and are based on one of the indicators used for multiple deprivation...These statistics are different from the school leaver destination statistics for the following reasons...the proportion is based on the overall 17-21 population (not just school leavers)...they relate to entries into a first degree course only...the time periods are different".

As I have said, Mr Speaker, offence and consternation have been caused. Can you advise me first on how the statistics can be corrected, secondly on how we can ensure a more respectable debate on school leaver destinations, and finally on how the House can receive an apology from the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire for causing such offence to the people of Govan?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. I cannot say that it satisfies the criterion for a point of order, although it is not in a small minority in that respect, in terms of what purport to be points of order. Moreover, I am grateful to him for confirming that he has informed the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire of his intention to raise the matter: that is especially important in view of the charge he has levelled against her.

As I think the hon. Gentleman knows and as I have just said, that was not a point of order. I have no responsibilities for the accuracy or otherwise of what may have been said on a television programme, even one so notably august as the BBC's "Question Time", by a Member of this House. I did see "Question Time" last week, although I do not recall the particular use of statistics upon which the hon. Gentleman quite understandably focused his beady eye.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's inquiry about how he could achieve redress, let me say that I think that by raising the issue he has found his own salvation, and in the process, perhaps, that of the people of Govan, with whom he may wish to communicate further on this matter. It is not for me to plunge into an internecine conflict between colleagues. All that I will say, as far as the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire is concerned, is that in the 14 years for which I have known her I have always regarded her as a person of absolutely unfailing personal courtesy. We will leave it there for now.

BILL PRESENTED

VEHICLE EMISSIONS (IDLING PENALTIES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse presented a Bill to increase penalties for stationary vehicle idling offences, to grant local authorities increased powers to issue such penalties, and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 395).

Freehold Properties (Management Charges)

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

2.11 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require landlords to provide accounts of management charges payable under section 19 of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967 to freehold property owners, and for connected purposes.

These payable management charges are usually known as estate management schemes. As the name suggests, estate management schemes allow the landlord or scheme manager to collect money in relation to the retention of some degree of management control on the land that had been sold to the leaseholders. This often also includes control over amenities and common areas related to the freehold dwelling houses. The rationale of the original legislation was to allow the landlord to collect, retain and spend the fees for the general good of the area.

In my constituency I have Calthorpe's Edgbaston estate, which covers a 2.5 square mile area. I read directly from Calthorpe's website:

"We introduced the Scheme of Management under Section 19 of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967 to ensure that the original character of individual properties and the uniqueness of our residential developments are retained. Under the Scheme it places obligations on freehold occupiers to ensure they adhere to a number of requirements."

Under section 19 of the 1967 Act freehold occupiers must adhere to a range of requirements by virtue of the scheme of management. For Calthorpe estate residents these can range from not building without permission to not hanging or laying out washing to dry on Sundays. So there are the obligations on freeholders but section 19 does not contain any obligations on the landlord, and that is why I have today brought forward this ten-minute rule Bill.

As it stands, the management scheme is only enforceable by landlords. Freeholders of individual dwellings have no right to know where their money is being spent. These residents have no rights of redress and no rights to enforce action when breaches of the scheme occur. We need transparency for residents to be able to hold their landlord or scheme manager to account. This Bill would create a requirement for the landlord or scheme manager to provide transparent accounts outlining the management charges received and the nature of the expenditure.

The Government have spoken at length about legislating to give freeholders the same rights as leaseholders when it comes to service charges. I quote from one of their letters I received from the Minister for housing and homelessness, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), regarding this issue:

"I believe very strongly that service charges should be transparent, communicated effectively and that there should be a clear route to redress or challenge if things go wrong."

I want to be clear: the management charges to which this Bill pertains apply to freeholders and are distinct from services charges. I am asking that the fees related to estate management schemes are not forgotten. It is clear to me that currently the balance of power is neither fair nor appropriate. Management companies can, by law, use enforcement agents to collect the management charges but individual dwelling freeholders are unable even to obtain details of where the money they have been charged goes or has gone.

I thank the Calthorpe Residents Society for its work on this. These residents, and others around the country who face similar predicaments as a result of their management schemes, have made repeated representations to their landlords asking for an account of the expenditure to see how the management fee that they pay is being spent. To date, no accounts have been made available for the Calthorpe residents. This means residents have no way of knowing how their annual fees are being spent by the landlords or scheme managers in maintaining a high quality across the estate. Residents who own their own homes as freeholders are left feeling helpless as they try to find out how much is left in the scheme, and they are rightly aggrieved that, despite their payment into the said fund, the opacity of it makes them powerless to try to enforce the responsibilities of the landlord or management scheme manager.

Today I ask the Government to strengthen the legal position of all freeholders to ensure that they have the right to know how the money that they must pay to the landlord or scheme manager under section 19 of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967 is being spent.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Preet Kaur Gill, Jack Dromey, Kate Osamor, Helen Goodman, Jo Platt, Maria Caulfield, Ruth George, Caroline Lucas, Mr Virendra Sharma, Jeremy Lefroy, Huw Merriman and Kevin Hollinrake present the Bill.

Preet Kaur Gill accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 396).

Rehabilitation of Offenders

2.17 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): I beg to move,

That the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (Exceptions) Order 1975 (Amendment) (England and Wales) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 1 April, be approved.

The purpose of this draft instrument is to include inquiries established under the Inquiries Act 2005 as “excepted proceedings” in the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975. That will enable those types of inquiry to consider the spent convictions of individuals. This legislative change was requested initially by Sir John Mitting, chair of the undercover policing inquiry, and I will pause now to pay tribute to his predecessor as chair, the late Sir Christopher Pitchford. Sir Christopher was a distinguished member of the Bar, a High Court judge and Lord Justice of Appeal, who sadly died in the middle of this inquiry. He is much missed by all of us who knew and respected him as an outstanding lawyer of his generation.

Sir John stepped into the breach and is conducting this lengthy and serious inquiry. The reason for the request he has made is that information on individuals’ spent convictions is important for the purposes of the terms of reference of the inquiry.

The inquiry is examining undercover police operations conducted by English and Welsh police forces from 1968 onwards, including whether the police were justified in launching undercover operations against a group. To give full consideration to this, the inquiry needs to be able to consider the convictions of members of the groups; however, given the historical nature of the inquiry, many of these convictions will be spent, and therefore not disclosable under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974.

The statutory instrument will give Sir John’s inquiry the ability to consider spent convictions. The change is vital for the inquiry to successfully fulfil its remit, and hon. Members will be aware that there is a high and appropriate level of public interest in this inquiry. Although the undercover policing inquiry is a particularly clear case of an inquiry where spent convictions are relevant, the amendment will allow any inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 to admit evidence of spent convictions and cautions, but—this is important—limited only to where that is necessary to fulfil the terms of reference of that inquiry. It is likely that other inquiries may in future need to consider spent criminal records.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and I appreciate his reassurance that the test is of necessity. Can he assure me that the same approach is intended to be taken by the chairman of the inquiry, as, for example, will be taken by a judge in determining the test of necessity and also relevance to the topic matter of an inquiry? Relevance is the normal test in court. Can he assure us that necessity will include that as well?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is the Chair of the Justice Committee and a barrister of long standing at the criminal Bar. He is absolutely right to talk about the test of relevance. It is not the purport of any inquiry ambit or the function of any

inquiry chair to adopt a floodgates approach to the disclosure and use of spent convictions. In the other place, the noble Baroness Barran put it very well when she set out to their lordships a flowchart of the way in which a particular decision about the use of spent convictions would be taken. She said:

“The first question is: does the individual have spent convictions, yes or no? If the answer is yes, are they relevant? Will they be treated anonymously? If they apply for anonymity, will that be agreed to? Further, even if it is not anonymous, is the hearing held in private or in public? If it is held in private, could the information then be published?”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 May 2019; Vol. 797, c. 1792.]

I thought that that was a clear exposition of the framework within which a decision maker would carry out their function when it comes to spent convictions. In other words, that is the sort of filter that I think meets the concerns not only of Members in the other place but of Members in this House.

I was talking about future inquiries, and was saying it is likely that other inquiries may need to consider spent criminal records, as these can be key to determining whether authorities have acted reasonably in assessing and responding to risk. The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 affords offenders protection from having to disclose their convictions and cautions, once those convictions and cautions have become what is termed “spent” under the Act. That is the point at which the offender has become rehabilitated. The exceptions order to that Act lists activities or categories of jobs where those protections are lifted so that offenders, if asked, need to disclose their spent convictions.

The primary rationale behind the exceptions order is that there are certain jobs—positions of public trust, for example, or those involving unsupervised work with children—where more complete or relevant disclosure of an individual’s criminal record may be appropriate to mitigate risks to public safety. The exceptions order is not limited to employment purposes, although that is its primary use. The amendment proposed here is not employment-related, but related only to the consideration of evidence of spent convictions and cautions in inquiries that are caused to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Justice Committee has produced a report that recommends “banning the box”, to deal with the issue of spent convictions, and the Government gave a very positive response. There may be occasions when there is a crossover between an individual who might apply for a job in the public sector and somebody who is covered by an inquiry. I just want to get the Minister’s take on that particular point.

Robert Buckland: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very proper point, and I can assure him that the work that his Committee has done and the campaign to ban the box are matters that I and my colleagues in the Department are considering very carefully indeed. I will chart the changes that we have already made to the 1974 Act and the direction of travel later in my remarks, but I would say to him for that in the flowchart that I have outlined, the sort of concerns that he properly raises about an individual’s employment prospects could be raised in the inquiry before the Chair, when the Chair decides whether to publish the information or to retain anonymity. So there will be safeguards designed to protect against the sort of mischief that he properly probes me about.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): May I politely remind my hon. and learned Friend that it is not just employment prospects that will suffer if the box is not banned? There can often be a problem with getting social housing—indeed, any sort of housing—as well as with getting insurance or going to university or college. I welcome this statutory instrument, but it is particularly important that we get this absolutely right and proportionate.

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend uses the word “proportionate”, and as a distinguished former Government lawyer, she knows what that means. I think many other people—Madam Deputy Speaker included—will know precisely what it means. It means, in effect, making sure that any measure does not defeat the purpose for which it was brought into force. In other words, it must not become self-defeating, and the response must be in line with the nature of the challenge. My hon. Friend is also absolutely right to talk about the wider context. We have to look at meaningful rehabilitation, and we have all seen plenty of examples of individuals who have committed offences and been punished for their crimes and who have been able to go on in later life to make a success of their work and family life and become the sort of citizens we want to see in our society. That is self-evident, and it is certainly the experience that all of us will have had at some point or other.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I think the Minister is putting all our fears to rest. Paragraph 7.6 of the accompanying explanatory memorandum refers only to independent inquiries into child sexual abuse. Is that in effect what this is all about, or is it going to be wider than that? I thought that if people had signed the sex offenders register, that was already admissible evidence, so could the Minister confirm that this is not just about historical child sex abuse and tell us what the status of the sex offenders register is?

Robert Buckland: I am looking again at paragraph 7.6, and I think its purpose is to illustrate other examples of inquiries that have been set up pursuant to the Inquiries Act 2005. I will go on to explain that, because that does not cover every public inquiry. I will give the House a few examples as I develop my argument. In this case, the ongoing independent inquiry into child sexual abuse is used as an example of a 2005 Act statutory inquiry that may need to consider criminal records in the course of its deliberations. It is therefore a useful illustration of another inquiry that was set up because there was a strong public interest to be served and one would benefit from not having to undergo what would otherwise be a rather cumbersome and lengthy process of looking at the admission of evidence on a case-by-case basis.

As we know, the independent inquiry is taking considerable time, and it would be in the wider public interest for its work to be sped up in this way.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) talked about the register; as he knows, sex offenders are required to sign that on conviction. That public document is recorded and kept just as a conviction would be. From memory, how long an offender has to stay on the register will depend on the seriousness of the offence. Some very serious child sexual offences will, of course, rightly require life registration, so the matter will remain on public record.

The hon. Gentleman was a Member when that Act was passed; he might have a better institutional memory than mine when it comes to the debates that led up to that. My experience of it was as a practitioner and recorder, having to make sure that defendants complied with the requirement. The sex offenders register is not a court order but a statutory obligation that follows automatically on conviction.

I come back to the exceptions order, whose primary use is for employment purposes. The amendment that we are discussing is not, of course, employment related: it relates only to the consideration of evidence of spent convictions in inquiries caused to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005. Although a number of judicial proceedings are exempt from the protections of disclosure—in those proceedings, there is no restriction on considering or basing conclusions on spent conviction information—inquiries made under the 2005 Act are not currently exempt.

Examples of proceedings that are exempt include circumstances ranging from solicitor and police disciplinary proceedings, to proceedings relating to taxi driver and security licences. We feel that the work of inquiries set up under the 2005 Act is necessarily of such public interest and importance that they must have the ability to consider all the evidence relevant to their work. To extend that ability to these inquiries, we must amend the exceptions order.

The draft instrument is necessary to amend the order to enable inquiries caused to be held under the 2005 Act to admit and consider evidence of convictions and cautions that have become spent under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, where it is necessary to fulfil the terms of reference of that inquiry; the word “relevance” again comes very much into play.

We recognise the importance of the 1974 Act, which offers vital protections to people with convictions. We improved those protections in 2014, reducing the amount of time that most people with convictions had to wait before their convictions became spent. As I mentioned in responding to the intervention made by the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), we are considering proposals for further reform to the 1974 Act following the recommendations made by various reviews in recent years, including those carried out by the Justice Committee, on which the right hon. Gentleman serves.

There are demanding criteria for inclusion on the exceptions order. Our proposed inclusion would be the first addition to the order in three years. As I said, the amendment proposed here is not about employment; it relates only to the consideration of evidence of spent convictions and cautions in judicial proceedings—namely, before inquiries caused to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005.

Understandably, their lordships raised concerns in the other place about granting all inquiries the right to consider spent convictions and the effect that would have on individual rights. I want to make it crystal clear that we have proposed to extend this power only to a limited number of inquiries; as I said, we are talking only about inquiries set up under the 2005 Act, so non-statutory inquiries, such as both the Butler and Chilcot inquiries on the Iraq war, would not be covered by this legislation.

This legislation applies only to inquiries where considering spent convictions is necessary to fulfil their terms of reference. An inquiry's terms of reference are set by the Minister, in consultation with the chairman of the inquiry.

[Robert Buckland]

That provides an element of individual consideration of whether the exception should apply to each inquiry that ensures that this will not apply indiscriminately. Frankly, considering spent convictions will not be necessary for the vast majority of inquiries. In other words, the measure already has a limited application.

Our view is that sufficient safeguards are in place to ensure that individual rights—the issue that concerned their lordships—are preserved as far as is necessary. Under section 1 of the Inquiries Act 2005, inquiries are caused to be held by a Minister when particular events have caused, or are capable of causing, public concern, or there is public concern that particular events have occurred. As such, inquiries by design are held only where they are in the public interest, so any limited interference with an offender's article 8 right to private life under the European convention on human rights would be necessary and proportionate.

Article 8 enshrines the right to respect for private life, but that is a qualified right. Subsection (2) provides that there shall be no interference with that right except such as is in accordance with the law and necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety, or the economic wellbeing of the country, or else for the prevention of disorder or crime, the protection of health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. Section 19 of the 2005 Act has specific regard to these rights, in as far as they ought be protected, but it does so in a way that enables the inquiry to fulfil its terms of reference and consider matters necessary in the public interest. In that way, the 2005 Act directly reflects the qualified nature of the right to privacy.

Robert Neill: The Minister is being most generous, but will he help me? He asserts, in terms, that if the inquiry is set up under the Act, it automatically triggers some of the exemptions to article 8. What is the remedy, however, if a person who is to be called as a witness by the inquiry is aggrieved and wishes to challenge the finding of the inquiry chair to admit the evidence of a spent conviction? Would there be a judicial review in the ordinary way?

Robert Buckland: There would be a judicial review. That point was considered carefully in the other place. I readily accept and deal full on with the potentially onerous nature of having to bring a judicial review to challenge proceedings. But as I have said, the filter system that any chair would have to operate is considerable. There are safeguards and guarantees in respect of anonymity and publication that provide the sort of safeguard that, if misapplied, would quickly and obviously attract criticism when a higher court came to scrutinise the decision process.

Victoria Prentis: Will the Minister help the House? Are the chairmen of these inquiries not nearly always senior judges, who are perfectly able to make the sort of evaluation that he is telling us about?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As she will know, the process of obtaining a senior serving member of the judiciary will be done in consultation between the appropriate Secretary of State or Minister and, usually, the Lord Chief Justice, who will consider

availability carefully. Retired High Court judges or lord and lady justices of appeal can also be considered. We are particularly fortunate, as I said at the beginning, to have Sir John and, formerly, Sir Christopher. They were asked to fulfil the role of chair as a result of consultation between Ministers and the Lord Chief Justice.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): If I understand it, this is about spent convictions. As we do not know the nature of any future inquiry in which spent convictions would need to be disclosed, would it not make sense to introduce a statutory instrument when a future inquiry needs such disclosure?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Lady tempts me down the road of ad hocery, which, as we know, can be a somewhat cumbersome instrument when it comes to issues of this nature. She can be reassured that the narrow nature of this proposed exception means that, first, the type of inquiry is tightly constrained to within the 2005 Act. Secondly, I do not envisage that many of even those types of inquiry will have to deal with the issue of spent convictions. Where they do, there will be a clear process for the chair to follow in assessing relevance, whether the spent convictions should be anonymised and whether they should be published. I would submit that there are lots of safeguards, which I hope will cure her justified concerns.

I am at times, quite properly, an advocate of ad hocery, which has been part of our system since time immemorial, and I agree with the words of the noble Lord Mackay of Clashfern, the former Lord Chancellor:

“My Lords, I well understand the need for this order in respect of the application that has been made, but innovating the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act to any extent can be done only as a matter of principle. It cannot be done ad hoc for a particular inquiry. Therefore, what is the principle under which it would be allowable in respect of this inquiry? The answer is that it is required to fulfil the inquiry's remit. Only that would justify it. The application says, ‘We cannot fulfil the remit we have been given unless we are allowed to examine this matter’.

In my submission, it is extremely difficult to have an ad hoc system.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 May 2019; Vol. 797, c. 1788-89.]

I entirely agree with the noble Lord, and I would pray in aid his remarks in support of my argument today.

I was addressing the right to privacy, and I was going to elaborate upon my earlier remarks on anonymity. Inquiry chairs must preserve the anonymity of individuals as far as is necessary to respect their legal right to privacy. The chair of an inquiry has the power under section 19 of the 2005 Act to restrict the publication of information via a restriction notice. The undercover policing inquiry, for example, has invited applications for restriction orders. Individuals can use these orders to seek to maintain their anonymity.

The chairman must apply a strict balancing test under section 19, taking all relevant circumstances, including potential harm or damage to an individual, into account when deciding to make a restriction order. Where an individual is not satisfied that this has been done appropriately, they can make representations to the inquiry and ultimately, as I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), they can judicially review the decision. Together, we feel these represent a strong system of checks to ensure that individuals' rights are upheld.

As some inquiries will be obliged to have regard to the rights of those who hold criminal records and to the legitimacy of using such evidence in the course of their duties, our view is that the duties of all inquiries are of sufficient seriousness to justify clarifying that they may take spent criminal record evidence into consideration where they believe it is necessary.

Although we do not think that considering spent convictions is likely to be necessary for the vast majority of inquiries, adding only the UCPI to the exceptions order would set a precedent that may lead to further requests—that is the ad hocery point. Adding those inquiries to the exceptions order now will ensure that more efficient use is made of the parliamentary process, as further amendments will not be required for each specific individual inquiry as and when it arises.

Not proceeding with legislation would prevent the UCPI and other statutory inquiries from admitting evidence of spent convictions, which would mean treating people with spent convictions as though those convictions had never occurred. The worry is that the inquiries would then have to accept a somewhat distorted version of reality. That could ultimately lead to conclusions based in part, or sometimes in whole, on false premises, which clearly would not be in the public interest.

We have to remember the wider purpose of inquiries set up under the 2005 Act, the job that chairs are given, the serious and grave nature of many of these inquiries and the strong public interest that underpins and runs through such proceedings and their purpose. My conclusion is that not doing so would clearly not be in the wider public interest, and I therefore strongly commend this statutory instrument to the House.

2.46 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new position. We worked together on the Justice Committee and, as always, he is eloquent in trying to convince the House to pass something that I am sure, in his heart of hearts, he knows is not correct. As a lawyer and advocate, he must understand the concerns that have been raised, especially in the other place. I am sure he is well aware that the other place voted against this statutory instrument and the rebellion included a number of Conservative Members of the House of Lords. I ask him, even at this stage, to reconsider whether this statutory instrument should be approved.

The Opposition understand the sentiment and the principle behind this statutory instrument in terms of assisting public inquiries into groups where spent convictions may or may not be relevant. The request came from Sir John Mitting, the chair of the inquiry into undercover police operations from 1968 onwards, including whether the police were justified in launching undercover operations against this particular group.

The request makes sense because one of the issues in this particular undercover operation is whether any of the convictions occurred because of agents provocateurs, which is where a person has committed an offence because an undercover police officer somehow encouraged or facilitated it, or put the idea in their head. The concept of agents provocateurs is a complex legal issue, and it is clear from some of the allegations that this may have happened in this set of undercover police operations, so the convictions of some of those who may give evidence

will be pertinent and relevant because they might shed light on the actions of the police officers. Therefore, we understand that for this particular inquiry this approach may be relevant and spent convictions will add a critical context to the inquiries that we would not have under the current system. However, we believe that the wording of this proposal is far too wide and is not properly structured. As my colleague Baroness Chakrabarti said, it seeks to use

“a sledge-hammer to crack a walnut.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 May 2019; Vol. 797, c. 1786.]

It is too far-reaching and too blunt to be effective without seriously threatening rehabilitation and privacy.

The powers granted by the order would mean that the spent convictions of past offenders under investigation would become unspent in terms of policing and inquiries, and, crucially, may become unspent in the public eye. It completely goes against the spirit of rehabilitation that served sentences may be reopened for potentially unconnected investigatory purposes. In this information age, the checks and balances proposed by the Minister, whereby an inquiry's chair may rule spent convictions inadmissible, may come too late to protect the individual; this information may be raised and shared by counsel in countless different circumstances before the chair can decide whether it is relevant and, therefore, admissible. Furthermore, given the speed at which information travels on the internet, any ruling by a chair could become a bit of a lame-duck decision, because the information would probably have already reached the public sphere. Indeed, Lord Hogan-Howe, the former Metropolitan Chief Commissioner, pointed out that the internet hive mind may mean that

“the public may know more than the inquiry chairman.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 May 2019; Vol. 797, c. 1791.]

In essence, once the information is out, the information is out, and it is unrealistic to expect every subject of this instrument to have the energy, time and resources to lodge a judicial review or request a restriction order to maintain anonymity. In any case, a restriction order from the chair of the inquiry would be likely to come too late to prevent the damage being done.

It is worth noting that, since the introduction of the 2005 Act, there have been only 23 public inquiries and this is the first time that a provision such as this has been proposed. Surely we should not be setting such a troubling precedent because of one inquiry; 22 others have not sought such blunt and excessive powers. It would only take someone to overlook a potentially minor and irrelevant conviction in their past and fail to mention it to their representative for their credibility and witness evidence to be undermined. This really calls into question how far the justice system will try to support rehabilitation, when spent convictions can be brought into public inquiries with limited oversight.

The checks and balances proposed seriously threaten article 8 of the European convention on human rights because they presume, first, that information regarding spent convictions will not reach the public eye without prior approval and, secondly, that the subjects of the instrument have the time, energy and resources to ensure that their rights are properly protected. I re-emphasise this point because we must recognise that, with the legal aid cuts and all the other cuts that have been carried out, and with a lot of people who are involved in these inquiries often not being financially solvent, trying to

[Yasmin Qureshi]

get legal assistance to maintain a judicial challenge or review is almost impossible. The lives of these ordinary people are being made even worse with this particular legislation, given the wide nature of its current format; people's rights will not be properly effected.

At the heart of our criminal justice system is a need for the rehabilitation of convicted offenders, and the need for fair and transparent public inquiries is of real public interest. If the alternative to this overreaching order is to individually discuss the procedures of each public inquiry, that is a use of parliamentary time that accurately reflects public interest; I would much sooner the House establish the admissibility of spent convictions in terms of a public inquiry in advance of each inquiry.

Again, I say to the Minister that it is still not too late to take this SI away and reconsider the issues we have raised. We are talking about real issues, such as the fact that vulnerable witnesses may be dissuaded from giving evidence to a public inquiry for fear that a spent conviction for a minor offence committed when they were a child could come up and be in the public domain, and their families could find out, as could prospective employers. The consequences for those victims may be enormous, so they may not wish to engage in any particular inquiry, in which case we would not be being very effective. The Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee expressed serious concerns about

“the breadth of the power and what impact it might have on the lives of those who have been rehabilitated.”

As I have said, we successfully tabled a motion of regret about this SI in the other place. We gained sizeable support on this matter, including from some on the Conservative Benches. A Conservative peer, Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbots, who is a member of that Committee, said that the concerns of the Committee and the other House were raised with the Ministry of Justice but its response was “largely fanciful” and “not realistic”. We therefore ask the Government and the Minister to seriously reconsider this SI, for all the reasons that have been mentioned.

2.56 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am always wary of extending powers that can trespass upon the convention rights of citizens and generally wary of giving blanket powers to organs of the state. I am very much in favour of the rehabilitation of offenders legislation and spent convictions. As the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) observed, the Justice Committee recently published a report that urges the Government to consider reducing the amount of disclosure that is required, particularly in relation to spent convictions that occurred when the person concerned was a child or young person. There is no doubt that that is a desirable course of action, because the inappropriate and unnecessary disclosure of spent convictions can be a serious bar to rehabilitation—I think we would all be as one on that.

That is why I looked twice when I saw this statutory instrument; I looked at it with some care and at what was said about it in the other place. On balance, having listened to the Minister's careful and thoughtful explanation, and with all respect to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench and for whom I have great regard, I find that the objection to it is ill-founded. This is

enabling legislation, in the sense that, I understand, it makes provision for spent convictions to be admitted in particular classes of statutory inquiry where they are relevant—it is not general legislation insisting that this should happen. As the Minister rightly said, the relevance test has to be met in any event.

One or two questions are raised that we could helpfully think about. First, it is asserted that there may be a risk of people being dissuaded from becoming witnesses at an inquiry if the provision is in force. With respect to the Opposition Front Bench, I am not convinced by that, because the same would happen under the ad hoc arrangement that is suggested. If someone were likely to be a witness in a particular inquiry, they would be put off as much by ad hoc secondary legislation as by the generally enabling provision before the House.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend agree that as statutory inquiries have the ability to summons witnesses, as much as many courts do, that would deal with the issue?

Robert Neill: That is precisely right. Someone summoned to give evidence to a statutory inquiry would be obliged to come forward. With all due respect, it seems to me that it is a false point that should not weigh on us.

The second point is that even when people are summoned there is still a safeguard. It seems to me that the safeguard of the application of the test of relevance, in what is after all an inquisitorial process, as opposed to the criminal, adversarial one, is proper and appropriate. I am concerned about the potential cost of somebody having to seek a judicial review, because that process is lengthy and difficult.

Robert Buckland: One of the great functions of this debate is to tease out some of the issues. Before public inquiries are published, is there not a Maxwellisation process whereby individuals who might be referred to in a way that is potentially adverse to their interests are notified? Is that not another safeguard?

Robert Neill: It is indeed; my hon. and learned Friend anticipates the point I was about to move on to. A series of steps and procedures have to be gone through in relation to a statutory inquiry, and that puts the person concerned on clear notice that the issue may become relevant and may be raised. They then have the opportunity to make representations before the chair of the inquiry. Should the ruling go against them, there is then the fall-back position of a judicial review.

Out of a sense of fairness, and taking an approach of equality of arms, if someone is summoned to give evidence before a statutory inquiry and it is likely that a spent conviction is going to be considered as being admissible and argument is going to take place on those grounds, that person, if they are not otherwise legally represented already, ought to have the ability to be legally represented. I urge my hon. and learned Friend to consider, where appropriate, with those in his Department who deal with matters of legal aid, that that person, if they are not represented either as part of a class or group or because of their own means, should have access to legal aid to argue before the inquiry whether the spent conviction should be admitted. It involves a very small sum of money because in practice it is likely to happen only on a limited number of occasions.

That would be an appropriate additional safeguard from the point of view of equality of arms. I hope that my hon. and learned Friend will take that point away. Subject to that request, it seems to me that the safeguards are met. It is better to deal with this matter with one piece of legislation rather than to come back on an ad hoc basis.

I hope that this discussion also reminds us all of the advantage of having legally qualified inquiry chairs. Non-statutory inquiries that do not have legally qualified chairs have sometimes spiralled out of control because the chairs are not adept at dealing with, for example, the admissibility of evidence or case management generally, in the same way as a judge is able to. Perhaps that lesson can be taken away, too, but that should not stand in the way of our supporting a useful and proportionate statutory instrument, having weighed up all the pros and cons, as we have in this debate.

3.3 pm

Robert Buckland: This might not have been the longest of debates, but I very much hope that those listening, particularly in the other place, will abandon their usual criticism of our House, because it has been a wide-ranging debate. It has included not only contributions from the Opposition Front Bencher—I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her warm words; we served together on the Justice Committee for a lengthy period and her background in law is well known—but important contributions in interventions from the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Through the debate we have dealt with and, I hope, laid to rest some of the objections that have been raised. On the objection that somehow the prospect of the potential disclosure of spent convictions in the limited circumstances described might deter people from coming forward, it has been pointed out that witnesses can be and are summonsed under the 2005 Act inquiry process, so the question of their not choosing to come forward becomes somewhat more academic.

On the issue of challenge, I have already set out the five-stage test that the chair of an inquiry would apply before admitting into evidence and then publishing the details of spent convictions. Under the Maxwellisation process, before publication the chair and the inquiry secretariat will invite representations from people who might be referred to in a way that is adverse to their personal interest, and those people will then be able to make full representations before final publication. That is yet another check and balance in the inquiry system.

Let me say a few words of slight dissent from what my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said about always needing a former judge, perhaps, or someone who is legally qualified as chair. I pray in aid the independent inquiry into child abuse, which Professor Alexis Jay is chairing expertly. Of course, she enjoys the support of highly qualified lawyers: the counsel to that inquiry, Brian Altman QC, and his team are there to help to make sure that the inquiry keeps very much to the course of relevance, and they look carefully at how proceedings are conducted. Of course, those proceedings

are ongoing, so I shall say no more about them out of respect for the independence of that important inquiry and its work.

The Government are absolutely committed not only to maintaining the protections in the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 but to looking into proposals for strengthening it. I look forward to engaging warmly with right hon. and hon. Members on that work. There is a strong case for adding the type of inquiry we have discussed to the exceptions order. An ad hoc approach would not be appropriate. I submit that the strong public interest that would be served by the proposal, the narrow nature of the extension, the checks and balances that will exist to protect the interests of those affected and the wider public interest should all drive the House to the conclusion that this draft statutory instrument should indeed be approved, and I commend it to the House.

Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

The House having divided: Ayes 266, Noes 192.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 250, Noes 185.

Division No. 417]

[3.7 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Afolami, Bim	Collins, Damian
Afriyie, Adam	Courts, Robert
Aldous, Peter	Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Allan, Lucy	Crabb, rh Stephen
Amess, Sir David	Crouch, Tracey
Andrew, Stuart	Davies, Chris
Argar, Edward	Davies, David T. C.
Atkins, Victoria	Davies, Glyn
Bacon, Mr Richard	Davies, Mims
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi	Davies, Philip
Baker, Mr Steve	Davis, rh Mr David
Baldwin, Harriett	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Bebb, Guto	Docherty, Leo
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Dodds, rh Nigel
Benyon, rh Richard	Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Beresford, Sir Paul	Donelan, Michelle
Berry, Jake	Double, Steve
Blackman, Bob	Dowden, Oliver
Blunt, Crispin	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Drax, Richard
Bowie, Andrew	Duddridge, James
Bradley, Ben	Duguid, David
Brady, Sir Graham	Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Brereton, Jack	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Bridgen, Andrew	Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Brine, Steve	Ellis, Michael
Bruce, Fiona	Elphicke, Charlie
Buckland, Robert	Eustice, George
Burghart, Alex	Evans, Mr Nigel
Burns, Conor	Evennett, rh Sir David
Burt, rh Alistair	Fabricant, Michael
Cairns, rh Alun	Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Cartlidge, James	Field, rh Mark
Caulfield, Maria	Ford, Vicky
Chalk, Alex	Foster, Kevin
Churchill, Jo	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Clark, Colin	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Clark, rh Greg	Frazer, Lucy
Clarke, Mr Simon	Freeman, George
Cleverly, James	Freer, Mike
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Fysh, Mr Marcus

Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Bill
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hughes, Eddie
 Jack, Mr Alister
 James, Margot
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kerr, Stephen
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Lamont, John
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David

Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Masterton, Paul
 Maynard, Paul
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Ms Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, Damien
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Simpson, David
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe (*Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill*)
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas

Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie

Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Wiggin, Bill
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Wendy Morton and
 Iain Stewart**

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
 Ali, Rushanara
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Clwyd, rh Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Crausby, Sir David
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Nic
 David, Wayne
 Davies, Geraint
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Dame Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farron, Tim
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glindon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Goodman, Helen
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hanson, rh David
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hill, Mike
 Hillier, Meg
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Susan Elan

Kane, Mike
 Kendall, Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Kyle, Peter
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lee, Karen
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Ian
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Reed, Mr Steve

Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sherriff, Paula
 Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft*)
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Laura
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Swinson, Jo
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitfield, Martin
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Wilson, Phil
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Thangam Debbonaire and
Jeff Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Animals

3.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I beg to move,

That the draft Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.

It is good to be here in the Chamber taking action on animal welfare again, after the Third Reading of the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill yesterday, and I very much appreciate the support of so many hon. Members for that legislation.

The regulations are important because they put in place Lucy's law. They establish a ban on commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens under six months of age in England—a ban that has been called for by committed campaigners and that has overwhelming public support. This is a positive step forward in cracking down on unscrupulous breeders and tackling the scourge of puppy smuggling.

Lucy was a Cavalier King Charles spaniel who died in 2016 after suffering terrible conditions on a Welsh puppy farm. Her plight inspired the Lucy's law campaign, which harnessed widespread support from the public and the animal welfare sector. Dogs such as Lucy are often used by unscrupulous breeders to produce multiple litters of puppies, which are taken from their mothers when just a few weeks old and advertised online or sold in pet shops.

There is not an animal lover in the land who would wish to support this abhorrent profiteering from cruelty, but here is the problem: under current rules, it is difficult for would-be buyers to know whether a seller is a bone fide hobby breeder who raises puppies and kittens in a caring environment, as their advertisement claims, or someone who breeds animals simply as a money-making exercise, without regard for their welfare.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Many of my constituents feel strongly that stronger action needs to be taken against the rogue elements among breeders, and there will be a lot of support for the measures that are being brought forward. The Minister is absolutely right about the appalling scenes that we have seen. To what extent does he believe that the steps being proposed will not just make things a little better but end this evil trade once and for all?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It is good to see that he has been campaigning hard locally on these issues and supports this campaign and that his constituents feel the same. I can assure him that this legislation will be a material step on. It has been welcomed by charities across the board—I will praise them in a minute for the fantastic work they have been doing—which feel assured that the proposals will not only crack down on unscrupulous breeders but be a positive step against puppy smuggling.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Following on from the Minister's proper remark about positive steps, does he agree that those who adopt rescue animals—dogs and cats, but particularly dogs—deserve a great round of applause because they are not only fulfilling

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

their own needs but helping to provide a proper home to an animal that would otherwise be mistreated or abandoned?

David Rutley: That is absolutely right. This legislation means that people will be able to buy puppies directly from a breeder or from a rehoming centre. It is vital to recognise that those who bring a rehomed puppy or kitten into their home are really looking after the welfare of that animal. Their efforts should absolutely be praised, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend has done that today.

The activities of these unscrupulous breeders are bad for buyers and also bad for the countless good breeders in this country whose reputations and businesses are at risk when the actions of others less decent than themselves threaten the integrity of the sector overall. That is why we are taking action today, just like we did yesterday.

I would like to thank the brilliant campaigners and animal lovers who have helped to bring this positive change before the House today. The Lucy's law campaign has been championed by vet and campaigner Marc Abraham and his fellow campaigners at Pup Aid. Lucy's law is supported tirelessly by organisations big and small, including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Mayhew, Cats Protection, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, and the Dogs Trust, all of which do so much to strengthen animal welfare across the country. I should also highlight the important work and support of the all-party parliamentary group on dog welfare so ably chaired by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who is in her place.

This decision to ban third-party sales of puppies and kittens followed a call for evidence in a public consultation that received over 6,500 responses, of which no fewer than 96% supported the proposal. The call for evidence was launched in response to an e-petition that called for a ban on the sale of puppies by pet shops and other third parties. The petition received over 148,000 signatures and triggered a debate in the House on 21 May 2018. This further demonstrates how Parliament and this Government can respond to public concerns.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we also have to stamp down on those who steal puppies to order? Many puppies are taken from outside people's houses, outside shops and the like simply because there is a market for them. This measure makes the market more regulated, and that can only be applauded.

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend, who makes another really good point. Absolutely—this will help in that dimension, but there is also more that we need to do to make people more aware of where they are sourcing their puppies. We need to do more to tackle puppy theft and dog theft. We will be working on that with various campaigners in the months ahead.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Everyone involved in the tough grassroots campaigning that took over 10 years to reach this point should be congratulated. I would particularly like to congratulate people in my constituency who worked very hard to get to this point. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that at the moment

Wales is not included in this measure? Does he expect the Welsh Government to follow suit very quickly in doing a similar thing?

David Rutley: I thank the right hon. Lady for her point. I will come on to what happens in the devolved Administrations. It is fair to say, however, that the Welsh Government are now considering their response to the three-month consultation. I praise her local campaigners for their hard work. It does take time to get these changes through, but I am pleased to say that in the space of a couple of days we are taking really tough action, on a cross-party basis, to move the agenda forward on animal welfare.

This statutory instrument implements Lucy's law by making an amendment to the parent regulations—the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018. The commercial sale of pets is already a licensable activity. The amendment means that licensed pet sellers, including pet shops and dealers, will no longer be able to sell puppies or kittens under the age of six months unless they themselves have bred the animals. Alongside the public consultation, a draft regulatory triage assessment was published. This legislation does not require a full impact assessment as the net estimated impact falls significantly below the necessary threshold of £5 million.

The ban will enter into force on 6 April 2020. The additional time before the ban coming into force will allow the sector to prepare. If the ban is rushed, it may encourage abandonment of puppies or their breeding mothers, or other unscrupulous activity. This approach is being supported by welfare groups and campaigners. Once it is enforced, the best place to buy or adopt a puppy or kitten will be directly with the responsible breeder or through one of the country's many animal rehoming centres.

This Government have shown that we take animal welfare very seriously.

Toby Perkins: The Minister is absolutely right to publicise and to put on record how many excellent, responsible breeders there are out there. There have been occasions in the past where Governments have legislated for all the right reasons but ended up creating nightmares for some of the smaller organisations, in particular. What representations has he had on this, and how much can he reassure us that the legislation, as well as being robust, is sufficiently well drafted that it will not create unintended consequences for responsible smaller breeders?

David Rutley: That is a good point. I think the hon. Gentleman will also recognise that when the regulations to which he is referring were introduced last year, the Department took a step back, listened to the concerns and addressed them. We have learned from that and worked closely with a number of welfare groups to ensure that the regulations before us are in a really good state, and we have time ahead of 6 April 2020 to ensure that they are fully worked through.

This instrument will help to address a number of welfare concerns associated with puppies and kittens bought and sold by third parties. Those concerns include the early separation of animals from their mothers, unnecessary journeys at a young age from breeder to pet shop, the sale of puppies and kittens at inappropriate

commercial premises, and unscrupulous breeders who are associated with third-party sales. The ban will help to tackle the blight of puppy smuggling, and it will also help the public to make more informed and responsible choices when sourcing a puppy or kitten. It will build on the new licensing regulations, which came into force in October 2018 and introduced a range of welfare improvements for dog breeding and pet sales.

Comprehensive statutory guidance underpins the 2018 regulations, and it was produced by the sectors concerned under the auspices of the Canine and Feline Sector Group. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is updating the statutory guidance on the activity of selling animals as pets, to take account of this ban on third-party sales. The changes are intended to assist local authority inspectors and licence holders by clarifying that non-commercial rehoming of puppies and kittens does not require a licence and requiring local authorities to notify existing licence holders of the change, so that they can prepare appropriately.

The guidance also outlines how to determine whether a licence holder bred the puppies and kittens they offer for sale, which is very important. A licence holder should be able to provide supporting evidence such as photographs, microchips and veterinary records to show that they housed and cared for the animal and its mother for the first eight weeks of its life, as well as the licence itself. The draft guidance has been shared with the sector, and we intend to finalise it well before the ban comes into force in April 2020, which I hope addresses the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins).

This statutory instrument applies to England only because the parent regulations apply to England only. Animal welfare is a fully devolved issue, and respective parts of the United Kingdom have slightly different approaches to the licensing of pet sellers and other animal activities. I understand that a three-month consultation was recently concluded on banning third-party sales in Wales, and the Welsh Government are now considering those responses, which is good news. In Northern Ireland, Members of the Legislative Assembly have shown support for a similar ban to be introduced, and officials in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs are following developments in England closely. Scotland has committed to reform the licensing of sanctuaries, breeders and pet shops and is considering a ban on third-party sales.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this excellent piece of legislation. He mentioned Wales. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee visited a puppy farm in Wales about three years ago—I am sure that the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), will touch on this—and it changed my mind on puppy farming. It was very disappointing to see that dogs could not be dogs. Could the Minister speak to the Welsh Government, to ensure that the information he has gleaned is shared with them and they can reach the same conclusion as us?

David Rutley: I know that a lot is going on to share best practice and experience among the devolved Administrations, and I will ensure that that takes place. I am sure that there is an active dialogue. There certainly

has been a very active dialogue in preparing the many SIs related to EU exit, so those relationships have been formed. It makes absolute sense, because in some areas Scotland is slightly ahead of us, and in this area we will be slightly ahead of other devolved Administrations. We do not want to have an animal welfare race, but we certainly want to ensure that we learn from this experience, because it is about the welfare of very important and much loved animals. My hon. Friend makes a good point, and we will follow that up.

The ban on commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens is an important step towards further improving welfare standards to ensure that our beloved pet dogs and cats have the best start in life. This Government are committed to protecting and enhancing the welfare of animals, and this statutory instrument is another step in delivering on these commitments. For the reasons I have set out, I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

3.39 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to be able to take part in this short debate. The Minister will be relieved that we will not divide the House; in fact, we are very supportive of this measure, and we think its time has come. It has taken a long time to get to this stage, but that does not mean we should in any way undermine how important this bit of legislation is.

I will ask the Minister some questions, because this is one of a number of pieces of legislation that DEFRA is obliged to bring forward, and we are clearly still looking for improvements to sentencing. Dare I say we need a definition of sentence? It is also clear that even rehoming and rescue centres need to be properly defined. I will come on to some of the concerns about that a bit later. As I say, this is only partial legislation, and it has to be made part of much fuller animal welfare legislation.

Today, we will pass this legislation, which is lovingly referred to as Lucy's law, after the King Charles spaniel that the Minister mentioned. I think it is rather nice that we have given it such a title because that animal was dreadfully abused. It was forced to breed many more times than she should have been and, even worse, the puppies were taken away in the most draconian manner. The petition gained 150,000 signatures, which proves that the British are a nation of animal lovers.

Ann Clwyd: It is worth reminding people that when Lucy was rescued from a Welsh puppy farm five years ago, she was suffering. The Cavalier King Charles spaniel's hips had fused together, and she had a curved spine, bald patches and epilepsy after years of mistreatment. She had been kept in a cage for most of her life, and was no longer able to have puppies. Although she was rehomed, sadly, she died. In memory of Lucy, I would be grateful to my hon. Friend if he mentioned her and the many people who have campaigned in her name.

Dr Drew: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. Clearly, it is a dreadful story, and she has filled in the back details.

As I have said, I know the British are a nation of animal lovers, but it is wonderful that 150,000 people put their signature where their heart was. The petition was launched by Beverley Cuddy, editor of *Dogs Today* magazine. She made the rather rash statement that if

[Dr Drew]

the Government accepted it, she would wear an “I love Michael Gove” T-shirt. She may like to give that to the President of the United States when she has finished with it, so he can be completely clear about who that is. She subsequently said that she would wear such a T-shirt about my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), the shadow Secretary of State, but we will leave that there.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I never get the constituency quite right, but I will keep trying—who is a doyenne of the all-party group on dog advisory welfare. Of course, a lot of other Members have supported this. Behind the scenes, there has been tireless campaigning by Pup Aid, CARIAD or Care and Respect Includes All Dogs, Canine Action UK, the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats, and Cats Protection, as well as others I have not mentioned. We can be justly proud of how they have managed to get the law through to this stage. That was not difficult in terms of the complication of the legislation, but the sheer effort of trying to get things through this place does take time and effort.

Chris Davies: There is a name the hon. Gentleman has missed out, which is Marc Abraham, who has been right behind this campaign. We heard from the Minister that he is a vet of distinction, and he really has led this campaign from the front. I would like the Opposition Front Bencher to pay him credit.

As the hon. Gentleman has mentioned the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the T-shirt about loving him, perhaps from the Conservative side of the House I could praise an organisation I do not usually praise, which is the *Daily Mirror*? It led a very good campaign on Lucy’s law, and we should pay it credit for doing so.

Dr Drew: I was coming on to Marc Abraham, but the hon. Gentleman has pre-empted me. I will take that bit out, as he has paid due regard to Marc.

There are many dog and cat breeders who will hopefully continue to provide the route that people should use to buy their pets. Animal companionship is something that we greatly underestimate. A number of us have fought hard to make sure that places that previously banned people from taking their pets in, including sheltered housing, rethought that, because it is important for people, particularly older people who may live alone, to have such companionship. We strongly support the statutory instrument, but would ask the Minister where the money is coming from, as this is not a nil cost. It is about having to up our game on supervising this operation. Organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals are our eyes and ears, but at the end of the day, we have to recognise that there will be an impact on the public purse.

The Dogs Trust has said that this is one of a number of changes that it wishes to see. It is seeking an update in the pet travel scheme, which is connected to puppy smuggling, as some people abuse the way in which we can rightly bring animals into the country. Much tougher controls on that illegal operation are needed. Is that something that the Government have in train? I have

asked about sentencing and sentence, and the regulation of animal centres, refuges and rehoming centres. Pet passports need to be revisited, because things have moved on since the original legislation was introduced.

Marc Abraham has written to us all, asking a number of rhetorical questions to show why the legislation needs to be introduced and looking at the Aunt Sallies that have been set up. Will the Minister say on public record why we can be assured that the measure will bear down on this dreadful trade? Marc asked why we are debating this today. That is down to him and to many other people. He also asked whether rehoming centres could be used as a devious device by people in the trade acting immorally but not illegally. Will the Minister explain how we are to make sure that Lucy’s law works in practice? Likewise, if the trade goes underground, as it could if we are not careful, what measures would the Government put in place? Marc answered that by saying that this was a perfectly good bit of legislation. It is important in its own right, but we should not lose sight of the fact that puppy smuggling is an ever-present and immoral trade. He ended by looking at that to make sure that if we agreed legislation today, it would have a positive impact on puppy smuggling, otherwise we would fail and would need to revisit the legislation and widen it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), in a debate that I attended, looked at the need to regulate animal rescue centres. It would be interesting to hear the Minister’s views on that. Is it something that the Government will introduce in due course? The RSPCA has argued that the difference between the best centres for the rehoming and rescue of animals and the worst is so dramatic that we need to look at how we ensure that the poorer centres are removed.

Without further ado, I am very happy to say that we support the regulations. We hope the Government will see them as not just a feather in their cap, but a feather in the cap of all those who led the charge in getting this piece of legislation through. I hope the Minister will say some good things about the other points I have mentioned, because it is no good just passing these regulations if we ignore the other important areas where it is clear there is animal abuse. Everyone in the Chamber wants to bear down on that. We can do our bit not just through this statutory instrument, but by what we do subsequently.

3.50 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I welcome the Minister’s speech and the statutory instrument. I also welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and endorse what he said about the need to change the law to increase the sentence to up to five years. At the moment, the maximum sentence is six months and four months if you plead guilty. For some of the horrendous cases, that is not enough. I do not think that party managers on any side of the House need worry about getting the regulations through, as only somebody who is slightly off-piece would go against them. We really need to get this done.

I am happy to welcome the regulations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) said, three years ago, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee undertook a report into animal welfare. One of our recommendations was to

ban third-party puppy sales. The Government decided that they could not go along with that, but when one chairs a Select Committee one never gets too worked up about that because there is a constant dripping and eventually the stone starts to wear and a new Secretary of State comes in and decides on a consultation. It is very good to see the regulations here today.

I want to talk about the practicalities. I, too, pay tribute to Marc Abraham and all the organisations. Many people have supported the campaign to get these measures on to the statute book. I include in that the general public because, as has been said, we are a nation of lovers. Do not forget: we are talking not just about dogs, but about cats. I am always corrected by Cats Protection. Cats also matter very much, so I want to put that on the record.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire talked about the time we visited a puppy farm in Wales. The dogs were bred far too often and did not get proper exercise, and the surroundings and conditions were poor. What also struck me was that the breeders received about £200 for the puppies, which were going to a dealer in Birmingham, who was probably selling them for £500 or £600. There are several issues here. Not only were the puppies bred in the wrong conditions, which were poor, but the money was going back not to the breeders but to the dealers.

I do not know how we deal with this exactly. I think I am right in saying that there are between 7 million and 9 million dogs in the country. That is quite a lot of dogs. If you say that, on average, a dog lives 10 years, you probably need 750,000 puppies a year to replace the dogs that have died. Therefore, we need good, proper puppy breeding probably on a reasonably large scale. It needs to be done properly, with bitches not overbred and other things taken into consideration; otherwise more and more puppies—I know the Government are tightening up on this—will be smuggled into the country. There only needs to be one television programme that promotes a particular breed of dog and then everybody in the world wants that particular breed of dog, and there are not the puppies here, so they become very lucrative. For some of the gangs, it is probably more profitable than dealing in drugs or anything like that and they are less likely to get prosecuted or to get as heavy a penalty. There are criminal elements who see this very much as a money-making operation.

I know that the Government cannot stipulate the quantities and breeds of puppies that are bred, and I do not think the shadow Minister, in a socialist Government, would even consider the idea of prescribing how many breeds or types of dog should be bred—*[Interruption.]* Only teasing, don't worry. We must face this issue because we have to ensure that there is a good supply of healthy puppies who are properly assimilated with their mother and are at the right age when they leave her. The set-up should not be as it is in many of these situations, where the puppies do not have their true mother and do not belong to that mother. All those things are a real problem, so this legislation is absolutely right. However, it will not completely cure the problem if we do not deal with the sentencing, so that someone who is cruel to animals can get up to a five-year sentence. Let us send the right message out to the criminal element and let us look at how the puppies are bred and make sure that we encourage best practice.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and has done a fantastic job on this issue with the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. There is a big demand for puppies, but does he agree that we should educate the public to take on cats and dogs from cat and dog homes? I mention cats as well; I would not want to miss them out. Such animals make excellent family pets, but they are often overlooked because they are not the in-thing or the popular breed. Part of that is educating the public.

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady always makes a very good contribution and I congratulate her on doing a great deal of work on animal welfare. She is absolutely right; that is essential. If someone wants a puppy, a kitten, a cat or a dog, they should look at what is available at rescue centres. However—as I said before—we have to realise the number of puppies that is needed. Children naturally love a puppy and this is the other problem: very often a child will go along to see a puppy and it might be one that has been misbred, has an illness, or has been smuggled in, but that child falls in love with the puppy and, naturally, the parents buy it for their children. Perhaps there are then huge veterinary bills, or the dog has bad hips, bad shoulders or a bad whatever, and all these things add to the tale of woe. We have to face up to that reality, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right about rescue centres. The point was made, of course, by the Minister and shadow Minister that we have to be careful that these situations are not used as a way of carrying on some sort of abuse of animals.

Chris Davies: As chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend led an excellent investigation and inquiry into puppy farming. He raises a particularly strong point. The criminal element in this and every other country will find a vacuum. If we rightly constrain the breeding, there will be a deficit between the number of people wanting puppies and the amount that we can supply, so they will come in from outside. Puppy smuggling will therefore be more of a problem than it is at the moment. As we found during our investigation, many puppies do not reach these shores alive. When they do, they are quite often deformed or damaged and they create a massive problem for the new owner, so we will really need to look at and crack down on puppy smuggling.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend reinforces exactly the point that I am making: too many puppies will be smuggled in. We are getting tighter at the ports, but we need to get tighter still and have people there. They will come through at different times of the day and night when there is nobody about.

There is another linked issue. Legally, one can go and buy five puppies and bring them in. How many people buy five puppies for themselves? Very few in my estimation. It is a legal loophole. Basically, someone gets a fraudulent form signed by an interesting vet in some other country—I will be diplomatic today, which is unusual for me.

David Rutley: Very unusual.

Neil Parish: I thank the Minister for that sedentary comment.

[Neil Parish]

Seriously, it is a problem. People can legally bring them in. If someone has a signed certificate from a vet in a particular country, they can bring them in. This could be another bonus from Brexit, dare I say it?

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Speaking as someone who moves our two dogs backwards and forwards all the time on a pet passport, I presume that all five puppies would have pet passports, which are expensive—in our case, about €50 each time we visit the vet.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. It is quite expensive, but I am not convinced that where many of these puppies come from the expense is so great. We must also remember that people are probably making £1,200, £1,500 or even £2,000 per puppy with some breeds. They are not smuggling in mongrels or cross-breeds; they are bringing in pure-bred dogs, although they are probably not as pure as they think they are and probably have the potential for disease, which is another issue to deal with—we could be bringing in dangerous diseases at the same time.

I have gone on a bit—you have allowed me to digress, Madam Deputy Speaker—but all these things are closely linked, as I am sure the Minister is aware. I welcome the regulations. There is another issue in respect of banning third-party sales. Let us imagine an establishment that is perhaps not the best breeder in the world. There is a problem there. If someone has to go to the premises to buy the puppies, they will, I hope, see the mother and what is happening in that breeding establishment, so to some degree it will be self-policing. If people go there and think there is something wrong, they are likely to report it and action will likely be taken—either the puppy establishment will be closed down or its operation will be tightened up and things will get better, since sometimes people breed badly out of inadequacy, rather than meaning to do it. So there is a combination of things. One only has to talk to the RSPCA to understand the problem.

Those are the key issues. The other issue, of course, which is more difficult for any Government to deal with, is that of backstreet breeding where people breed dangerous dogs. That is where microchipping comes in and all those other things that can hopefully go with it. By linking microchipping with the ban on third-party puppy sales, we should be able to tighten up on the backstreet breeding as well, however difficult it might be. The Metropolitan police and others are very good at the process because they have the specialists, although that is not the case all over the country.

I will not go any wider than that, Madam Deputy Speaker, because you have been very lenient on me. Suffice it to say that I am delighted to support the regulations.

Ann Clwyd: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech. As the owner of the Westminster cat of the year 2019, I think my cat will be concerned that we have not emphasised that the regulations cover cats as well as dogs.

Neil Parish: The right hon. Lady is, of course, right. It is also true that there are still a lot of feral cats, and if a feral cat gives birth to kittens, unless someone gets hold of them within a few days they will be feral as well.

The right hon. Lady need not worry: we will not forget cats. Cats are lovely. Dogs are lovely too, but sometimes they are given, shall I say, too big a bite of the bone.

Let me finally end my speech by asking the Minister not only to introduce this legislation, but, please, to increase the sentence for cruelty to animals to five years as soon as possible.

4.5 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a privilege to contribute to such an important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to see you in the Chair listening to it, and it is a pleasure to speak about the important legislation known as Lucy's law. I thank the Minister for his perseverance: a ban on third-party puppy and kitten sales is a momentous achievement. It has been supported overwhelmingly by the public, and it will make a fundamental difference.

Members of the public do not generally go to the dark web or illicit dealers to buy a puppy or a kitten, although they may do so to buy, for instance, drugs or guns. Most people who want to buy a puppy or a kitten want to make sure that it has come from a good place, that it is healthy, and that they are doing the right thing. This law is important because it will close the market for puppy farmers who are doing such a callous job in respect of animal welfare. Puppy smugglers will also take a direct hit, because there will be no legitimate reason for them to bring lots of puppies into the UK when there is no third-party market from which to sell them.

While the law will not close every loophole, it will tackle many of the issues that have been raised today, including third-party sales. Puppy farmers and smugglers survive because people are unaware of the background of pain and suffering and the abhorrent animal cruelty of puppy farms and puppy smuggling, which is masked because the animals are sold through third parties. Public education campaigns are not enough of themselves; they must be reinforced by legislation. It is confusing when people are told, "Always try to see the mother on site with the puppy that you are buying", while puppies are being sold via the internet and even in motorway service stations, or through other third parties such as pet shops. In those circumstances, people cannot be sure of a puppy's background, which is often hidden.

I want to thank, in particular, Marc Abraham. "Where's mum?" is part of the Lucy's law campaign, and I believe that both Marc and his own mum are here today. He has shown fantastic leadership in this campaign for many years.

It was an absolute privilege for me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group, to launch the Lucy's law campaign in Parliament in 2017. It has been a tremendous cross-party campaign. He is not here today, but I wanted particularly to mention the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), who has done so much to support the campaign. The public have really taken to it, and I have been described online a number of times as "the dog woman of Westminster". They have missed out the cats, but I think that I would have to relinquish that title to the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on cats and who looks after their welfare so well.

As I have said, this is a cross-party campaign. Support for it has been led tremendously well by Marc Abraham, and it has also been supported by Peter Egan, our patron at the all-party group. He is a great animal welfare campaigner, as well as being a fantastic actor.

I want to thank Pup Aid, Sarah Clover and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA. We have received fantastic support from Ricky Gervais, Rachel Riley, Brian May, Beverley Cuddy at Dogs Today, and many others, including Andrew Penman of the *Daily Mail*, who has already been mentioned. That is to name just a few, but everybody has come together in Parliament—the public, celebrities and animal welfare campaigners—to make this happen. The legislation will follow in Wales, post-consultation; I really do believe that will happen. As the Minister said, consultation is under way in Scotland on a raft of animal welfare measures and I hope that what I could call “MacLucy’s law” will happen in Scotland very soon.

Today’s events are a tribute to Lucy, the King Charles spaniel who is the eponymous hero of Lucy’s law. She was rescued by the wonderful Lisa Garner. As we have heard, until Lucy was rescued she was kept in a cage for most of her former life until she was no longer able to have puppies and then discarded. Her hips were fused together, her spine was curved, she had bald patches and epilepsy and suffered years and years of mistreatment. She had three good years of love with Lisa Garner but unfortunately died in 2016, and the campaign was launched in Parliament in 2017 in tribute to Lucy.

With Lucy’s law we are working together to look after the “underdog”. We are also looking out for all the dogs behind the scenes in puppy farms, hidden from the public, and their pups, who are often sold at five weeks, which is far too young, with no thought for any care or welfare by those engaged in this horrendous activity.

I thank everybody who has campaigned so hard on this important law and the Minister. Lucy’s law has been very much a cross-party, positive achievement in this Parliament and testifies to the progress in animal welfare legislation in this House.

4.11 pm

David Rutley: First, I say once again that it is fantastic to be able to participate in such a positive debate and to make such positive progress. I am grateful for all the contributions made today; they have all been constructive and the questions raised are legitimate. We do need to answer them and I will do my level best to do so.

It is important to correct the record, however. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) said we are “a nation of lovers”; I think in the context of this debate he meant animal lovers. We will leave the other subject for a different day, but we are talking about animal welfare here today. I just want to make sure that is absolutely clear.

It is important that we do not forget the cats. The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) was very clear about that, as she was in her praise of the tireless campaigners, which the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) did a fantastic job of doing, too.

Bob Stewart: Cats, as Winston Churchill said, look down on us, dogs look up at us, but pigs look us in the eye as equals. I just wanted to make that point, as a dog lover more than a cat lover.

David Rutley: Madam Deputy Speaker, I will allow you to decide whether that was in order. My hon. Friend has strayed slightly from the subject of today’s discussion, but as always he educates us on his views, and on those of Winston Churchill.

I cannot get away from cats because a very active member of our private office team is the proud owner of Percy, a kitten, and we have regular updates on his progress. I am grateful for the contributions to the debate, and it is important to highlight some of the work being done in the devolved areas as well. I am pleased to hear about “MacLucy’s” law; I have never heard it described as that before. We must make progress in those areas as well.

Dr Cameron: It is important that “MacLucy’s” law is taken forward across the UK, because we would not like puppy smugglers or farmers to feel that there is a safe haven anywhere. Given that so much has been put into the campaign, I ask the Minister to speak with counterparts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to try to make sure that this practice applies across the board.

David Rutley: Yes, I absolutely will do that. I have said that to colleagues in the context of Wales, and we will do that in Scotland as well. We need to move this forward in the United Kingdom.

I should also highlight the number of Whips who have been in the debate today—although they are not able to speak—including the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), and my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). They are huge animal lovers and wanted to be associated with the progress we are making today.

I want to deal with some of the points made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton on sentencing and increased sentences. We remain committed to introducing the necessary legislation to increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty from six months’ imprisonment to five years’ imprisonment, and I am working at the highest levels to ensure that the legislation needed to make the change is introduced at the earliest opportunity.

Neil Parish: Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Rutley: I will give way in just one second, because I was about to say that I am sure that those who make decisions about what goes on in this Chamber—the business managers—will listen carefully to those on the Opposition Benches and to the experienced voice of the Chair of the EFRA Committee in their calls to move this legislation forward. They have told us that they will not attempt to block this legislation, because everybody sees how important it is.

Neil Parish: I thank my hon. Friend, and that is exactly that point that I wanted to re-emphasise. There is so much cross-party support, and I cannot see why the managers of business in this House, on either side, should be worried. I know that the Minister is working hard, but please may we have this legislation sooner

[Neil Parish]

rather than later? He promised us several times that this was going to be done very quickly, but I must question him gently on how quickly he means. When will it be?

David Rutley: I have never ever had any gentle questioning from my hon. Friend. As I have said, I am pressing hard to get this done as fast as we can, and our aim is to bring this forward as soon as we can.

The hon. Member for Stroud made a contribution on sentience, and the supportive contributions that my colleagues have made today show that the UK is a global leader in animal welfare. The Government's policies on animal welfare are driven by a recognition that animals are sentient beings. We are acting energetically to reduce the risk of harm to animals, whether they are pets, on farms or in the wild, and we will ensure that any changes required to UK law after we leave the EU are made in a rigorous and comprehensive way to ensure that animal sentience is recognised. DEFRA continues to engage with stakeholders to further refine the Government's proposals on sentience, and we are currently seeking the right legislative vehicle in this context.

The hon. Member for Stroud also made points about rescuing and rehoming centres. I hear the concerns that he expressed about these organisations. In the Westminster Hall debate on 26 February 2019 on animal rescue homes, I said that

"we must do everything we can to ensure that good welfare practices are in place in all animal rescue homes."—[*Official Report*, 26 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 74WH.]

Legitimate rescue homes do incredible work rescuing and rehoming thousands of sick and abandoned stray animals each year. We have heard praise for them in today's debate as well. I had the honour of visiting the Mayhew rehoming centre a few weeks ago when we announced the laying of this statutory instrument, and we discussed the importance of responsible purchasing and rehoming of puppies and kittens. We want to make progress here, and we need to be confident of the benefits and impacts of any regulations placed on these organisations, particularly some of the smaller rescue and rehoming charities, which is why we are actively exploring these issues with the organisations involved.

The hon. Member for Stroud asked about resources for local authorities leading on implementing and enforcing animal licensing controls. Importantly, they have the power to charge fees, which factor in the reasonable costs of enforcement associated with licensable activity. DEFRA works closely with local authorities and the City of London leads on the training of local authority inspectors. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton talked about the importance of self-policing,

and it is important that we continue to get intelligence and input from the public as well. They have an important role to play.

Further contributions were made about the importance of addressing puppy smuggling. In other debates we have highlighted the need to do further work on this, and I personally and DEFRA take a zero-tolerance approach to this abhorrent crime. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton has talked about the number of puppies that should be allowed to come across our border at any given point in time with one owner. As I have said to him in other places, we would be in a position to review that after we leave the EU.

There was further discussion about Marc Abraham's views on licensing and rescue homes. I am pleased that he can be with us today; it is great to see him recognised for the important campaign that he has taken forward. We agree that there is a clear difference between a legitimate charitable rehoming centre and a business selling pets. The latter will be subject to a ban on third party sales for puppies and kittens, but as I have already discussed we are seeking to regulate the rescue and rehoming sector.

Rehoming charities often charge a rehoming fee. Some have suggested that unscrupulous pet sellers could take advantage of that by reinventing themselves as rescue and rehoming organisations to get around the ban. That is why we will be working with canine and feline sector groups and local authorities to develop specific guidance to help distinguish between non-commercial rescue and rehoming centres, which are charities, and pet sellers, which are businesses.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow made important points about the publicity campaign that we need to take forward. We need to do further work on helping people to purchase pets responsibly, and we have committed to doing that. We have also assured the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that we will work to provide the best advice to help people to look after their dogs and cats responsibly.

The Government are committed to protecting animal welfare. This legislation will help put an end to the inhumane and abhorrent conditions that animals such as Lucy are subjected to. It will ensure that puppies and kittens are born and reared in a safe environment with their mothers and sold from their place of birth. Those who decide to bring a pet into their home can know that it will be healthy and has come from a responsible breeder. I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.

Backbench Business

Invisible Disabilities and Accessibility Challenges

4.21 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered invisible disabilities and accessibility challenges.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) for co-sponsoring the application, and the right hon. and hon. Members who will take part. I also thank the Minister who is responding; I was extremely grateful that, along with other colleagues, he spared the time yesterday to attend the roundtable discussion on this issue. We are all keen to look into this matter more closely over the coming months. I hope the Minister will agree that the roundtable was a constructive, illuminating and at times exciting discussion in which we were able to preview the new accessibility signage that reflects all disabilities, whether visible or invisible.

Before discussing the new signage and the wider campaign to improve our understanding of invisible disabilities, I want to reflect briefly on the progress that we have made as a society when it comes to people with all disabilities. The landmark legislation that I, as a Labour Member of Parliament, am particularly proud of, is the Equality Act 2010: a historic amalgamation of rights, placed under one statute, in the final days of the last Labour Government. The Act enshrined all the protections in one place for all disabled people in this country—a benchmark for our future direction of travel.

Many pieces of legislation start with an inspirational story involving an inspirational campaigner acting as a catalyst for change. One such campaigner is the reason why I stand here today to speak on this issue. Before I came into politics and before I considered standing to represent East Lothian as Member of Parliament—even before Brexit started, believe it or not—I had the honour of being a teacher at Prestonpans Primary School. I had the great pleasure of teaching hundreds of children over the years. I truly take pride in every young person I had the privilege to teach.

One person, who has already achieved so much in her short life and is now my constituent is Grace Warnock. Grace is a passionate, articulate, intelligent and creative young person, who is determined to change the hearts and minds of people around her. She is resolute in her mission to remind everyone that not all disabilities are visible. Grace suffers from Crohn's disease—a condition that many hon. Members will be aware of. Those with Crohn's need more than most to use accessible toilet facilities, sometimes at very short notice. When Grace tried to use an accessible toilet some years ago, she was accosted, heckled and abused. She was targeted because Crohn's is not a visible illness. I would not blame any young person who, after experiencing such an incident, kept their head down, possibly even avoiding accessible toilets and facilities.

Grace felt embarrassed. She was upset, but she was also determined to do something about it, so she created a toilet sign that strikes a powerful chord—one that asks people to have a heart and to consider the range of

disabilities that exists. This sign, first displayed in her primary school, has spread across Scotland and is changing perceptions along the way. It is empowering people like Grace, who may feel unable to do so, to use accessible facilities, which is a great testament to Grace's work and to her mum, Judith. The next step is to take forward the energy, the enthusiasm and the ideas of Grace's campaign and to put forward new signage that can be a British and international standard.

That brings me to the work of another inspirational woman, Lucy Richards. Lucy is the creative director of StudioLR, and she wants to use design to take on some of society's big challenges and to make a positive impact on people's lives. Lucy specialises in inclusive design, creations that are simple for people to understand. Working with people with dementia and in partnership with Life Changes Trust, an incredible charity based in Scotland, she has designed a new set of everyday symbols that help people find their way around. She was inspired by Grace's campaign, and her work includes a new symbol for people with any disability. There is a need for a sign that is easily understandable to all.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend, like me, has been contacted on many occasions by blind constituents, who have great difficulty finding their way around obstacles on the pavement. He also mentions toilets, and there is now a big shortage of toilets in the towns of this country, which may well be down to local government cuts. The Government should be looking at those two issues.

Martin Whitfield: My hon. Friend anticipates, as he so often wisely does, where my speech is going on street furniture and people with sight problems, and on the availability of toilets and facilities generally across the United Kingdom.

Yesterday I was delighted to meet the British Standards Institution, which supports the establishment of inclusive signage. Understandably, the process of standardisation is rigorous, and it is fair to say that it perhaps does not lend itself to political timetables. I am under no illusion. This is a long-term project, and there are a number of barriers that stand in the way.

Of course, because of parliamentary convention, I cannot explicitly show hon. Members the symbol. However, I am happy to preview the design after the debate. The "any disability" symbol depicts a range of disabilities, both visible and invisible, and it can be accompanied by text saying, "For people with any disability." This is a profoundly important message that strikes at the heart of the campaign.

The nucleus of the campaign that Grace started those years ago is about changing the perception of what disability looks like. It strikes at the heart of how we define a disability. There are 13.3 million disabled people in the UK—21% of the population. If we examine the figures more closely, they reveal that 25% of those who are disabled report a mental health impairment and a further 18% have other non-visible conditions, yet I worry that what it means to be disabled is still not properly understood.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech on such an important issue. As chair

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

of the all-party parliamentary group on disability, I was approached before this debate by a number of individuals who would like me to point out that those with an autistic spectrum disorder are often overlooked or badly understood by members of the public, and such disorders are certainly not noted as a disability because they are not visible. As I know because my husband suffered a head injury while serving in the Army, head injuries can cause cognitive processing difficulties, and so on, that are not obvious. This signage is great work, and it will aid understanding of the whole range of disabilities and impairments.

Martin Whitfield: The hon. Lady raises a most profound and important point: people's understanding of disability is influenced more by their personal experience than by what society brings together as to what it is to be disabled.

The figures show that those with non-visible disabilities suffer an unfair double attack. What sits at the heart of Grace's campaign about having a heart and of what we hope to achieve here today and in the future is making that playing field more level and fairer. I worry about a misunderstanding of what amounts to "a disability". Crohn's and Colitis UK, which is leading the way in trying to change perceptions about this issue, has undertaken a huge amount of research, which shows that 93% of people think that if they challenge someone who looks healthy for using an accessible toilet, they are "standing up" for the "rights of disabled people" or doing this because the situation is not "fair" on others. One noticeable aspect of this debate is that I do not think many of the people who took part in that survey answered maliciously; they genuinely feel they are doing the right thing by pointing out to someone they do not think is disabled that they are doing the wrong thing. Their first thought is, "I want to stand up for people who are marginalised in society, those who rightly deserve full accessibility rights". This instinctive reaction to what people believe a disability "looks like" needs to be challenged.

It is worth noting that the false perceptions of what constitutes a disability have a profound effect on the individual's mental health. In preparing for this debate, I have been made aware of some incredibly upsetting cases of abuse directed at disabled people who have been queueing for accessible toilets or trying to use a parking bay. Further research by Crohn's and Colitis UK shows that two thirds of people with Crohn's or colitis have experienced an accident while they have been queueing to use a toilet, and they have, in turn, received abuse for that. Almost half say that they will change their attitude to social spaces such as restaurants because of their condition. That is just wrong, in this society; it is a damning picture of the everyday experience that disabled people suffer.

I was struck recently by an article on the impact of invisible illnesses by how hurtful people's perceptions are. The piece noted what just an everyday misconception associated with a disability can do. We are talking about the idea, "You can't be sick because you look so well." There is a misconceived image of what it looks like to have one of these illnesses, and things start with a tiny casual gesture or throwaway line but then quickly evolve into something far more pernicious.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Dementia is one of those invisible cognitive impairments. I chair the all-party group on dementia, which has just conducted an inquiry on dementia as a disability. As a society, we still face issues on access to blue badges and on attitudes and how people relate to those with dementia. I am very grateful to him for his speech today.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for that intervention. The Minister will find that one of my requests at the end may make reference to that point.

Let me follow up on what has been said about those who suffer acquired brain injury, as there are many instances where people feel that the person in front of them is drunk and has not suffered an injury. People who have fatigue syndromes are accused of laziness when they ask for a seat. In employment, people with these invisible conditions are often disproportionately discriminated against. Those with neurological conditions such as autism will struggle in a conventional workplace setting, but this is to miss the great opportunity and strength that people with autism can offer in the workplace.

I was interested to hear yesterday from leading charities about the impact of signage, particularly in respect of conditions that affect the functioning of the brain. Signage that vulnerable people can understand works for everybody and will go a long way towards allowing people, particularly those with dementia, to become and to feel more integrated in society. It is such small changes that go a long way towards changing the lives of significant numbers of people.

I stress that I do not want this debate, nor the introduction of new signage, to dilute the need to reform and rearrange the built environment for those who suffer from a physical disability. Wheelchair users and those with mobility challenges face huge obstacles in our society, and this is in no way an attempt to split the two groups. In fact, it is an attempt to bring them together. Whether it is the creation of more accessible homes, the altering of transport infrastructure or the forcing of private companies to improve their surroundings, it is all helpful.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I remember that when I was trained as a dementia friend I was shocked to be informed that sometimes if a person with dementia comes across a dark rug on the floor, they get absolutely petrified because they think it is a hole. When we make public places, we have to realise that we need to be careful when we put down a dark rug or piece of carpet or whatever, because it might look like a hole to someone with dementia, and they are sometimes terrified.

Martin Whitfield: That powerful intervention shows that those people who are not suffering from dementia or do not feel that they have a disability need to think about the simple things to make the world and the community accessible to everybody in society.

We have an obligation under article 19 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. We should continue to lead by example. Will the Minister update the House on the work the Government are doing to ensure that the UK continues to meet its international obligations? In particular, how are the Government ensuring that those with invisible disabilities

face no barriers to their day-to-day lives? How can we make sure that they can live their lives without facing abuse?

I call on the Minister to support the campaign for an easily understandable disability sign and, crucially, for there to be a standardised version of this sign that truly represents people with a wide range of visible and invisible disabilities. Once we have accepted the layout and design of a new accessible sign, we can start to progress the campaign and to consider how it can be rolled out. On that point, will the Minister consult colleagues across Government to explore the possibility of implementing such signage on our blue badge parking and disability railcards? People with a range of invisible disabilities are entitled to hold those passes. It would be a symbolic and practical change to the lives of those with such conditions if Government literature reflected the use of the new sign. I would be grateful if the Minister would agree to one further meeting with me and colleagues to discuss how we can move the matter forward.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend's excellent speech. He made the point about people not recognising disability, but there are problems even when it is recognised. Tanni Grey-Thompson is a very well-known former athlete who uses a wheelchair, and she suffered terrible embarrassment on a train because of failure to access a disabled toilet. Even when someone is well known, that often does not help them if the facilities are not made available when they should be.

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely, and that is why the call for a new sign is a small request in a big argument that requires society to change its view and stop seeing people with disabilities and instead see disabled people.

I thank Lucy Richards for the work she has put into creating the new signage, and I am grateful for the support of everyone who attended yesterday's roundtable, including my hon. Friends the Members for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I am also grateful for the work of the Life Changes Trust, Innovations in Dementia, Dr Gordon Hayward and Rob Turpin of the British Standards Institution. I also thank my constituent Grace for the incredible work that she has put into the campaign.

In conclusion, although we must keep ensuring that our built-up environment is fit for purpose for everyone who uses it, environmental changes go hand in hand with changing social perceptions and meeting the holistic range of accessibility challenges that individuals in our community face. I hope that hon. and right hon. Members will use this time today to note the value of changing perceptions about invisible disabilities.

This debate is about far more than just accessible signage, but symbols matter because societal attitudes reflect the way that they are interpreted. Until we start a national conversation on how we change and adapt accessibility signs to reflect any and all disabilities, we will continue to marginalise disabled people across the UK. That goes against Grace's fundamental reason for starting this campaign: she wants society and people to have a heart.

4.40 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): It is truly an honour to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) in this debate. I congratulate him on his excellent speech and thank him and the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) for bringing forward this important debate this afternoon.

Reading the original application to the Backbench Business Committee, I was struck by the campaign from the hon. Gentleman's constituent Grace Warnock. Members across the whole House should be grateful for the work that she has done to raise awareness of the challenges that she and, indeed, very many of our own constituents face on a daily basis.

Although it is an enormous time after the actual event, may I welcome the hon. Member for Newport West to this House? I served with her predecessor on various Committees and cross-party groups and was proud to be one of the very few Tories that he never verbally slaughtered in the Chamber, presumably because we mischievously used to gang up on the then Chairman of the Committee on which we both served just for a giggle. He will be much missed in this place, but I am in no doubt that she will very quickly find her own way in this incredible madhouse.

I will not pretend that I am an expert on disability, hidden or otherwise. I am, however, very proud to be the independent chair of Medway Council's physical disability partnership board—a role that I have had for some time. I have learned a phenomenal amount about the challenges that those with physical disabilities face—something that I as an able-bodied individual would never ordinarily appreciate. The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who is no longer in her place, was quite right to mention some of the challenges that exist, such as being able to find suitable toilets, which is something that Baroness Grey-Thompson experienced.

I recall hearing a story while serving on the partnership board that may make Members laugh because it is amusing—apart from to those to whom it is relevant. A blind constituent of mine got on a bus and asked the driver to tell her when she was at her stop, to which the driver replied, "Well, can't the dog tell you?" That just shows how we as a society still have so much to learn about physical disabilities, and even more to learn about hidden disabilities. In my time as chair of the partnership board, I have got to understand other disabilities or health conditions better, but I am always willing to accept that I need to learn so much more.

One of my great pleasures in life is whiling away time shopping, yet so many places are desperately inaccessible to those with hidden disabilities. I am pleased that, across my constituency and slightly beyond its borders, greater efforts are being made to support better accessibility for those with varying disabilities. The Pentagon shopping centre in Chatham, for example, has Sound-Out Sunday on the first Sunday of every month. It is not until it is explained that it seems like a complete no brainer. The centre minimises ambient noise, including turning off music and hand dryers, as well as having a chill-out zone, should people need to take a break from the crowds. Bluewater, which is a major retail outlet in north Kent, beyond my constituency, is permanently introducing services, including weekly quiet hours, sensory toy bags and hidden disability lanyards that allow staff to proactively offer assistance.

[Tracey Crouch]

My young son's soft play centre of choice, Adventure Kidz in Aylesford, offers special educational needs and autism friendly sessions so that there is inclusivity even at the earliest stage in life. My son does not have autism, but he does not like hand dryers. He gets incredibly upset by them, so we find it difficult to take him into a public toilet. I therefore just have that tiny insight into what it must be like for those who do have autism to find themselves really quite unsettled by noise. Anything that public places can do to reduce that impact and that disturbance, particularly for young children with autism, is incredibly important and very welcome.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady's speech is very enlightening about many of the things we could be doing. Following on from the comments by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), does she think that one of the issues we have to overcome with invisible disabilities is not only our own ignorance of what they might be, but people's reticence to come forward because they fear that their invisible disability might be rejected as a disability?

Tracey Crouch: I absolutely agree. I always think that one of the main advantages of being Members of Parliament is that we get exposure to issues that, ordinarily, members of the public do not. We get to learn things and to discover issues and conditions that ordinarily pass the vast majority of members of the public by. The more we can do to educate and inform people about these issues, the better. My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) mentioned what he had learned as a dementia friend. Like the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), I was previously—before ministerial life—a co-chair of the all-party group on dementia. What we learn in this place about dementia is incredible, and we need to get that across to everyone.

As the chair of the partnership board, I have learned things about disabilities that I would never have come across. Some of that is just about basic education and information. Unless someone has a family member who is affected, or they themselves have a disability—physical, visible, intellectual or hidden—they do not necessarily know about these things, and they certainly do not understand them. I have tried in my speech not to use the word “understand”, because I do not think I would ever fully understand these things; I could only appreciate the challenges that people face.

It will be no surprise to anybody in the House that one of my other great pleasures in life is watching and participating in sport. I want briefly to give a nod to the amazing Special Olympics team and their sponsors—especially Coca-Cola, which has partnered them since 1978. Special Olympics is by far the largest disability sports organisation in the world, with a strapline of transforming people's lives through sport. Our competitors, who do not receive any regular funding from central Government—much to my disappointment, but not due to a lack of effort—are quite possibly the happiest, smiliest, most appreciative group of people you will ever meet in your life. I would like to mention the phenomenal work of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who has supported Special Olympics for many years.

Special Olympics GB notes that 200 babies are born with an intellectual disability every week. Eight out of 10 of them will be bullied and all will be socially excluded. Sport dramatically enhances the psychological, physical and social wellbeing of every athlete, as well as having a positive impact on family members, who often face increased isolation and mental health deterioration.

Team GB has just returned from this year's world games in Abu Dhabi with 169 medals, 61 of which were gold. What an amazing achievement, but what a shame it was barely mentioned. For the competitors, the world games would have been a life-enhancing moment, and I for one am trying to get some of the medal winners to come to my constituency, to go round some of my local schools and especially to meet those who share similar challenges—who knows, those athletes might even inspire them into sport in one way or another.

Sport England has been enormously helpful in recent years, and it now provides much-needed funds to get more people with physical, hidden and intellectual disabilities active. We know that those with disabilities are twice as likely to be inactive as able-bodied people. Sport England has also provided funds to Special Olympics to engage more volunteers and to support the delivery of competitions, to help it develop its commercial opportunities. However, I firmly believe we should be doing more as a state to support the Special Olympics organisation and its competitors.

When the Minister held this brief before, and I was still in my old post, we spoke of what more we could do to support Special Olympics. I would be grateful if he agreed to resume that discussion with this now humble Back Bencher and others who might have an interest. There is a real appetite for the future world games to be held here, and I see no reason why we should not support that bid in the way we did for the Olympics and the Paralympics. Imagine how brilliant it would be for our athletes who have a variety of different disabilities to compete in front of home crowds as we welcome several thousand athletes from 170 countries around the world.

Had I realised that I would have more time, I would have prepared something celebrating some of the excellent work that goes on in my constituency, in this House and beyond on having a better understanding of dementia. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth has been doing a fantastic job in that regard. Locally, we have a dementia alliance that is trying to work with all partners to ensure that we have proper dementia-friendly communities. We have an ambition to make this place dementia-friendly, but we still have a very long way to go with that. We could start by getting rid of all the black strips and black rugs in this place.

Bradfields Academy is one of my favourite schools in my constituency. I am an honorary member of its school council. It is a special educational needs school. It has children there with extremely challenging disabilities, yet it is one of the calmest and kindest schools that I go to in my constituency.

I pay tribute to Kent Autism Trust, which is doing some brilliant work with local people and local employers to get a better understanding of autism and how we can support people with autism into the workplace and in our communities.

I would like to make special mention of those who support people with Parkinson's disease. As the hon. Member for East Lothian said, some people assume

that people with Parkinson's are drunk. It is one of those conditions where people think that some sort of inebriation has been involved because of their reactions. We still have a long way to go in getting a better understanding of that.

I pay tribute to the work that the Government are doing with Changing Places. I recently listened to an incredibly powerful and emotive phone-in on a local radio station about the challenges that people still face in just going into their own communities, particularly town centres, and finding it very difficult to find places to use the toilet.

Some debates in this House really influence and inspire Members to do more for their constituents, and so far this has definitely been one of them. I am genuinely inspired by the hon. Gentleman's constituent Grace. I will take away much of what I have learned today and consider what more I can do, in addition to the work I do on physical disabilities, to support those with hidden disabilities in my own constituency and beyond.

4.52 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for instigating this debate, which I am delighted to be able to co-sponsor.

The whole point of the development of a new sign—Grace's sign—is to be welcomed as a physical reminder that not all disabilities are visible, but also as a general encouragement to us all not to take people at face value. We need to have compassion and care for one another, as this sign reminds us. As a physiotherapist, I was well used to treating patients with disabilities that were visible because of, say, a plaster cast, crutches or a wheelchair. These are outward signs that the individual needs to be given extra consideration in a number of ways. We are all very used to seeing someone with a visual impairment using a white stick or a guide dog, and hopefully we react appropriately. This is perfectly normal.

In my previous role as a physiotherapist, I spent some time working with stroke patients, and it was my goal to help them to walk independently without the use of a stick. But my patients would often tell me that they wanted to keep the stick, even though they could walk independently, because other people knew that it signified that they may need additional time or space when walking. Certainly, in crowded areas, my patients valued the stick as an outward reminder to others that they needed to be treated with just a bit more care. So it is with people who may have invisible additional needs or disabilities.

My hon. Friend explained the origin of the planned new sign, so I do not need to repeat that, but there are others who have other invisible disabilities such as learning difficulties. I have worked with some fantastic children, young adults and adults who have learning difficulties. They do not want our sympathy; there is no need—they are getting on with their lives very well, thank you. What they need is our empathy and understanding. They may require extra help when accessing toilet facilities or a parking space for the family car close to the shops. These people look perfectly normal, whatever "normal" may be. They can walk, but some days they may not want to walk for whatever reason. Those are times when

Grace's sign would explain to the ordinary person that they need the extra space or help to ensure that they can get on with their lives.

Many people with mental health issues struggle to access public amenities at times. Their condition may fluctuate greatly, and that group of people would also benefit from Grace's sign, to remind others that sometimes they need extra time or space when they are out and about.

I have been contacted by Jonathan Kingsley from Muscular Dystrophy UK, who reminded me that although some people with one of the 60 types of this muscle-wasting disease may be able to walk, they cannot walk far. Their ability to walk may fluctuate on a day-to-day basis, so they need to be able to park close to amenities. People with muscular dystrophy may not use a stick or wheelchair, but they cannot walk far and may require assistance when using public toilets. Again, Grace's sign would remind the general public that people do not use disabled parking spaces or toilets unless they need to.

Sometimes people just need reminding to stop and think. They are not necessarily being unkind. Indeed, they may think they are protecting the person with genuine additional needs and stopping people using facilities inappropriately. They genuinely want to help people with disabilities, but they need to be gently reminded that not all disabilities are visible.

I hope that Members now have a better awareness of the nature of invisible disabilities. I call on the Minister to ensure that we work together on a cross-party basis to get this sign developed and implemented, perhaps at some pilot sites to start with. Ultimately, we need a sign that is universally recognised, to help the general public to better understand invisible disabilities and thus ensure that our society becomes more considerate and compassionate to all its members.

4.56 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). I thank her and the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for securing this very important debate.

People are often quick to form perceptions and slow to establish facts. For example, the young person not rising to give their elder a seat may in reality have a life-changing condition that genuinely prevents them from affording such a courtesy. Bowel and bladder cancer patients or persons with inflammatory bowel conditions may have undergone major surgery and be living with a stoma and discreetly concealed bag. The complexities of emptying and changing the bag in a sterile environment are difficult enough out in the community, without persons giving them the evil eye or, worse still, berating them for using an accessible toilet. Those with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease may not be at the stage of carrying an oxygen cylinder around with them, but they may nevertheless be unable to use a downstairs or upstairs toilet, opting for the accessible toilet on their level.

In 2017, the BBC's "Newsbeat" ran an article on new signage appearing on accessible—formerly disabled—toilets, which read simply, "Not every disability is visible." That is a fact; not every disability is visible. At that time, Tottenham Hotspur were reported to be the first football club to feature a revised sign on their accessible toilets.

[*Bill Grant*]

Two years later, I have not observed many such signs bearing that important additional information. Charities such as Crohn's and Colitis UK are lending their support to have the more informative signs fitted. That would not be an immense cost to many organisations in the United Kingdom and it would be a kindly thing to do for those who need a bit of extra help.

"Can't wait!" toilet cards have been available for some time to those with incontinence. When discreetly exhibited, the card confirms to others that the holder has a medical condition and needs to use the toilet urgently. That may mean using the accessible toilet, if the other toilets are occupied or there are queues. Those who daily face the fears and stresses associated with their conditions' symptoms and side effects from treatment should not have to face the potential additional burden of confrontation from ill-informed and often wicked, thoughtless protagonists who believe that they know better.

There is a wider issue: the availability of public toilets in general. Such facilities are on the decline throughout the UK due to financial cuts, inappropriate use by substance abusers or needless vandalism. I have had constituents contacting my office to express concern that they are becoming not quite housebound, but limited in the activities they are able to undertake outwith their homes as a result of the closure of public toilets. Their confidence is affected and there is a risk of social isolation evolving. I think that the closure of toilets is something that applies throughout the UK. We do not really realise that there are invisible victims of these closures. I was a councillor for 10 years and, yes, I too carry the burden of responsibility for being part of the closure programme in South Ayrshire.

Groups such as Inclusion Scotland work to achieve positive changes to policy and practice so that disabled people are fully included throughout all Scottish society, as they should be, as equal citizens. The Disability Rights Commission seeks to ensure that people are aware of their rights. The Government have undoubtedly enhanced legal protection under the Equality Act 2010, which was mentioned earlier. They have expanded their disability sector champions scheme, continue to roll-out their Disability Confident scheme, have announced their inclusive transport strategy and are consulting on a change to English building regulations relative to Changing Places toilets for those with profound disabilities.

However, at a time of concerns over social isolation, for those with the illnesses I have touched on, it is the basic quality of everyday life that must be our immediate focus. Will the theory of the Government policies address the real and practical issues of not being, as people say, caught short, or of having to face the indignity of being refused the use of a facility or challenged in doing so, as it was so eloquently put by the hon. Member for East Lothian?

For the most part, I believe it is the able-bodied across the United Kingdom who require to be re-educated. We must as a Government be proactive in putting the message out there. I ask the Minister to consider how the Government could facilitate such important improvements for those living with invisible disabilities. As has been said, improved signage would be a start and it is low cost. The Government could work together

with devolved Governments, local authorities, recognised charities and transport groups to ensure, where possible, that toilet facilities are provided and are accessible to all.

If I may, I will take a moment not to berate bus companies, which give a good service, but to point out that there are terminuses—a point of departure and a point of arrival—where there is no toilet facility. I will simply name Ayr bus station, but I am sure there are such bus stations throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. Is it not important for people to have access to a toilet on boarding the bus and that on their arrival they can be confident of finding access to an accessible toilet? I ask local transport groups, such as the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, to ensure that this goes on and I plead with bus station operators to go—dare I say it?—the extra mile for their customers.

For the wider community, I have a simple thought: be kind and thoughtful towards accessible toilet users as they may have invisible disabilities and accessibility challenges.

5.3 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this debate. It is an important issue. It is a shame that the Chamber is so empty again because every Member of this place will have constituents who have hidden disabilities. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on her speech. She clearly has some relevant experience that she is bringing to this place.

I am pleased to be able to take part in the debate because I believe that the issue of hidden disabilities can have an immense impact on individuals' lives. It is something we do not speak about enough in the Chamber. As some hon. Members may know from my contribution in a Westminster Hall debate earlier this year, my wife has an invisible condition—fibromyalgia—so I am well aware of how some of these conditions can be very hard to deal with. She can look perfectly okay on the outside, but she is really suffering on the inside. Fatigue can wipe out fibromyalgia sufferers for days at a time, and the pain experienced can vary from aching muscles and painful joints to extreme tenderness all over. There are cognitive challenges too, such as brain fog, insomnia and disturbed sleep. In fact, there are so many symptoms, it is not possible to list them all here. Just as with many of the conditions we have heard about today, the outside world cannot see that there is any issue at all.

My wife, like many others, has tried to find ways to manage her condition. She has to pace herself, plan ahead and make adjustments to keep her symptoms under control. That is the only way in which she can manage her condition. She does not always succeed—it still catches her out. It is incredibly frustrating and tough to know how best to help and improve things, which is why I, along with others, have called for greater awareness of the condition by the medical profession and employers so that fibromyalgia sufferers are not disadvantaged by more than their symptoms, and so that they have support out there in the world.

In common with many people with invisible, long-term and fluctuating conditions, what matters most to people with fibromyalgia is how their condition is treated and

supported. Much more research is needed on the condition and how it begins. We need consistent treatment pathways and better training for medical professionals to recognise those symptoms and recommend treatment. There is a huge need for services to be put in place to support and enable people with invisible conditions to live their lives as fully as possible.

I should like to discuss the barriers that people with invisible conditions face in their everyday life, beginning with getting back to work. I recently spoke in a Westminster Hall debate on another invisible condition, arthritis. An estimated 16,000 people in my constituency live with back pain. Another 4,000 and 8,000 people respectively are estimated to live with hip and knee conditions. Those are just some of the estimated 17.8 million people who live with arthritis or related conditions across the country. About half of them live with pain every day. That is a staggering number of people coping in their everyday lives, while people around them are blissfully unaware of their suffering. Just because we cannot see their pain does not mean that it should be ignored or written off as just how it is.

As with fibromyalgia, the problems that people with arthritic conditions face are exacerbated by the fact that they can fluctuate in severity, leaving them unsure how well they will be able to cope from day to day. That can make it difficult to hold down a regular job, but that should not be used as cover for discrimination. Many people with arthritis want to work and can do so if the right support is in place. Such help is available through the Access to Work scheme, but that is not working as well as it should, as various arthritis charities have said. They are also calling for the Government to commission research on the meaning of “reasonable adjustments”, and for support to be put in place to help people who challenge employers who do not act on Access to Work recommendations. Employers, as we know, are obliged to make reasonable adjustments but, if someone is in work and not a member of a trade union, who will argue the case for them?

There was a Westminster Hall debate yesterday on trade union access to workplaces. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) has introduced a private Member’s Bill on the issue, as some well-known employers have actively sought to prevent trade unions from accessing workplaces by banning visits or by manipulating shift patterns to prevent opportunities for engagement. It is important that we do as much as we can to ensure that people have access to trade unions at work so that they can be adequately represented. Rights are only as good as our ability to enforce them.

To return to employment opportunities for people with invisible conditions, on a practical level, how easy is it for them to raise issues associated with their condition at a job interview, or when they begin work? It is a difficult conversation to have because, although discrimination is unlawful, that does not mean that it does not happen or that it is not a difficult subject to raise at the beginning of an employment relationship. If an employer refuses to make adjustments, how realistic is it to expect people to take them to tribunal, especially without support, and what reassurance can we give them that if they raise those issues and put their head above the parapet it will not rebound negatively on them?

I want to say a few words about the challenges of employment for people with autism. In a recent survey of over 2,000 autistic adults, just over half of respondents said that they had told their current or most recent employer that they were autistic, but just under a third had not. For people with autism, busy workplaces can be socially overwhelming, or they can overload them with too much information from noisy conversation, bright lights or other sensory stimuli. Many of these barriers can be overcome quickly, easily and cheaply through increased understanding. We recently had some training here in Parliament on autism awareness—I certainly found it valuable. We can also make simple adaptations to the environment. Sadly, at the moment the National Autistic Society reports that about a third of its respondents said that support or adjustments made by their current or most recent employer, both in relation to sensory needs and to autism generally, were poor or very poor. We need to ensure that Access to Work is working effectively for autistic people and that specialist support is available throughout the country.

What about those with invisible conditions who are not well enough to work? We have talked about this issue many times, but my constituents’ experience of work capability assessments has not been good. Many decisions are overturned at tribunal and it seems to me that the system does not learn from its mistakes. A constituent of mine with two conditions I have already mentioned, arthritis and fibromyalgia, was assessed five times in eight years. At each assessment she was found fit to work. On each occasion she appealed and on each occasion she won the appeal. How can the process be wrong so many times? How can that waste of public money on five separate occasions be justified when the final decision has been the same every time? What does that say about the Government’s approach to people with long-term conditions? How many times does someone actually have to prove that they are not fit to work before it is accepted?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech, particularly in relation to the work capability assessment. Is he aware that sanctions are more likely for people with invisible health conditions? This is a real issue that needs to be addressed.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. From my experience in the constituency, those with mental health issues in particular sometimes have real difficulty engaging in the process. That does, very unfairly, lead to sanctions.

Some constituents have raised concerns about the speed at which assessments are carried out and the fact that assessors do not listen to the answers given. Others have had their request for a home assessment refused, despite medical evidence being provided that they are necessary. I am thinking, in particular, of one of my constituents who has an invisible condition but was refused a home assessment. That condition was agoraphobia. Surely the need for a home assessment in those circumstances was obvious? People who enter the system deserve compassion, respect and support. They should not be made to feel that they are on trial because they are ill. I am afraid that that is the experience of so many people who come to see me about the assessments.

[Justin Madders]

I want to say a few words on accessible toilets. I recently met a constituent who has a stoma, which, as I am sure Members are aware, is where the bowel is diverted through the abdomen so that bodily waste can be collected in a stoma bag. Stoma surgery is often used to treat a number of invisible illnesses, including cancer, Crohn's disease, colitis and diverticulitis. People of all ages are affected and have additional needs—for example, when using a toilet. But, as their condition is hidden, they often, as we have heard, face prejudice. There are no accurate figures on the number of people with stomas in the UK, but estimates range from 120,000 to 150,000. A lifestyle survey by Colostomy UK in 2016 of over 1,300 people with stomas found that 19% had experienced discrimination, either in the workplace, in public or elsewhere, and 30% of respondents had been challenged or criticised for using an accessible toilet. A constituent I met last week is actively campaigning in my local area, raising awareness of the needs of people with stomas. This has included encouraging local businesses and organisations to change the signage, so that accessible toilets are able to reflect the hidden nature of conditions. We have accessible toilets here in Parliament, which have signs to remind us that not every disability is visible. I see no reason every disabled toilet could not have accessible toilet signage along the same lines.

People with a stoma have additional needs when using the toilet, which can make even a simple day trip to the shops or the supermarket extremely stressful. A few easy-to-implement changes to accessible toilets would make a huge difference to people living with a stoma: ensuring that every toilet has a hook on the door to hang clothing, handbags and luggage while changing stoma bags; a shelf to spread out the items they need; a mirror to allow users to see their stoma while changing; and a disposal bin in every cubicle to avoid embarrassment for men and women having to dispose of their stoma bag in public view. I do not see why those changes cannot be implemented across the whole country.

Many people have conditions or disabilities that affect their everyday lives and they are disadvantaged by barriers in society and in the workplace. It is incumbent on all of us to do what we can to remove barriers that restrict opportunities and choices for people with disabilities, invisible or otherwise. We need to ensure that no one is held back because of these conditions, not just because we know that fairer societies are better for us all, but because everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

5.15 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). I thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for securing this really important debate and for giving us the opportunity to discuss the issues that are faced by and raised by our constituents, who have disabilities both visible and invisible, which can be a barrier to their independence.

One barrier to independence should not be travel. The disability charity, Scope, in its report, "Independent. Confident. Connected." found that 40% of disabled people often experience issues or difficulties when travelling by train in the UK, but there has been progress in transport accessibility in recent years, driven in no small

part by the Equality Act 2010. However, I would like to touch on a number of issues that disabled or impaired residents of Cheadle still face. These issues remain a real concern and I would like to see them addressed.

We are all keen to encourage people out of cars and on to public transport. It is really important that public transport recognises invisible and visible disabilities and makes the accommodations that need to be made for people to travel. Cheadle Hulme in my constituency is an important station on the rail corridor from Stoke-on-Trent and Crewe to Manchester Piccadilly, and it is well used by commuters travelling to and from my constituency for work or leisure. The construction and completion of lifts and a footbridge with funding from the Access for All programme is very much welcome, but several wheelchair users have encountered issues with the station's disabled access and particularly the lift, which is active only until quarter to 9 in the evening, even though trains continue beyond that time. That is an important issue for people who have disabilities. Because of it, one constituent had to get off at Stockport station and get a taxi to Cheadle Hulme, which is a journey of four miles. Another—this was a really terrible experience for him—had to carry his disabled daughter and luggage down the station stairs because the lift cannot be in use 24 hours a day, as it relies on the station being manned.

I recognise that all transport companies, such as Northern, seek to address these issues and provide help for those who need assistance, but that help is often not well known about by passengers or the service is not consistent enough to adapt to the needs of disabled people. I am pleased, however, that Northern is actively looking at how to address this issue and is undertaking a pilot at another station using technology so that lifts can be monitored remotely. It is important to know that there are ways to address all these issues. Whether a person has a visible or invisible impairment or need, these issues can be addressed.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The hon. Lady's point is entirely valid, because Northern has proposed to remove guards from trains. That makes the accessibility problem even more difficult, particularly given the number of unstaffed stations on the Northern network.

Mary Robinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree that we need to make sure that we have the right safety measures in place on all our trains, but my point is about the accessibility when people arrive at stations and the issues that they may have if a lift is not working. Clearly, we would not want a person to have to carry their disabled child up and down stairs.

Seven thousand people in the UK rely on an assistance dog to help with practical tasks and to go about their daily lives. For many people, the first and only visible sign of their invisible illness is their dog. I recently discussed this issue with Lynne from my constituency and I was distressed to hear the effect it has had on her. She was refused access to a taxi because the driver did not want the dog in her car. She suffers from regular epileptic seizures. She looks no different from any other person, but she is accompanied by her assistance dog, who can detect when she is about to have a seizure. I was amazed to hear that humans emit a specific odour that some dogs can recognise, which means they can warn their owner of an oncoming seizure, sometimes a

significant period in advance, to allow them to find a safe place and get the assistance they need. My constituent was left waiting in the pouring rain for 30 minutes for another taxi after being refused passage. The taxi would not accept her assistance dog as a passenger. She reports that sometimes taxis arrive, see her dog and move on or refuse to pick her up.

Businesses such as private hire taxi firms are a vital transport service for people suffering with physical or mental conditions—they enable them to get about—and they need to be made aware of the legislation protecting people with assistance dogs. It is a concern that not enough licensing authorities require drivers to complete disability awareness and equality training, and this should include people who have disabilities that are visible and those that are not.

I am encouraged that in response to the task and finish group report, which investigated the issue, Ministers have stated that they intend to include new guidance for licensing authorities. Under the Equality Act 2010, taxi and minicab drivers cannot refuse a booking on the grounds that someone has an assistance dog accompanying them. I appreciate that in some circumstances they may not be able to have dogs as passengers in their cars—for example, if they are allergic—but that is why the legislation allows for drivers to carry certificates of exemption.

Customers must be aware of this, however, when booking a taxi so that they are not left literally out in the cold. I would like all taxi drivers to complete disability awareness and equality training so that they know they should report discrimination. We also need to take action against drivers who discriminate against disabled passengers so that experiences such as those of my constituent do not continue. This is not about forcing new regulations on business; it is about reinforcing current legislation to protect disabled people.

Like epilepsy, bowel disease is also an invisible illness. While someone may appear to look okay on the outside, they might suffer from an invisible illness such as Crohn's or colitis and might urgently need to use a toilet when out and about.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I know I have just arrived in the debate, but I would like to pick up the hon. Lady's point about Crohn's and colitis. A close member of my family was diagnosed a few years ago with colitis, and their struggle to find public toilets and amenities and have it recognised has been a huge challenge. Does she agree that we need to raise awareness of those invisible diseases?

Mary Robinson: The hon. Lady knows from her own family experience how important this is and how seriously we need to address it. People who suffer from illnesses such as Crohn's and colitis might urgently need to use the toilet when out and about, and we need to ensure they can and that they are accessible. It is a major anxiety for people that stops them or prevents them from going out and about. Sometimes people have to think long and hard about their journey because of the impact it might have if they need to use a toilet urgently. That is why the roll-out of accessibility signage is so important. It needs to be addressed and people need to be made aware of it. I would like this to be a bigger issue that is taken on board by more and more shops, retailers and restaurants.

A "Can't Wait!" card is available to people with hidden illnesses—bowel disease, and so on—that they can show to staff at restaurants and shops without having to give a long explanation about their condition. In many cases, people find this embarrassing to talk about to strangers. That is the whole point of doing something about it. Some retailers are part of the "Can't Wait!" card scheme and recognise it, but a lot of independent businesses do not, and the wider knowledge and encouragement of such schemes is needed, alongside the roll-out of more accessible signage. I would be grateful if the Minister informed the House in his closing remarks what more the Department can do to encourage businesses to recognise these schemes. Whether or not someone is disabled, their ability to go about their daily life without hindrance is a right, and one that we must ensure is respected.

5.24 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I am grateful to each and every one of the Members on both sides of the House who have spoken so far, but I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for initiating this Back-Bench business debate. While—sadly—there is not much in the way of business going on in the House, I think it absolutely right that a debate of such importance take place on the Floor of the House rather than in Westminster Hall, as is so often the case.

I also thank the hon. Member for East Lothian for his passionate words about Grace and her mum Judith, and their campaign in respect of Grace's son. In too many cases, younger and younger people are experiencing disability. The fact that across Scotland a sign can be seen saying "Not all disabilities are visible" is encouraging to many people who now feel that their disabilities are recognised.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak up for many of my constituents who face hardship, extra costs and discrimination owing to invisible disabilities or illnesses. It is extremely important for us to recognise in this place that invisible disabilities can have a powerful impact on people's lives and livelihoods. I think that that has been recognised throughout today's debate, but we need to ensure that such conditions are fully recognised and respected in everyday society and the workplace. As we heard from the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), celebrating disability in sport is just one example of the ways in which we can ensure that society as a whole recognises the abilities that many people have, while also having a disability. The way in which society views disabilities such as dementia, Parkinson's and autism often contributes greatly to people's experiences of disability, and can also be stressful for the parents of young children.

There are many misconceptions about what a disabled person is "supposed" to look like, but many disabilities do not present themselves in an obvious physical way. That includes physical health conditions and neurological and mental health issues. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) told us that her own husband had suffered a head injury. That is another disability that is not seen every day, and I commend my hon. Friend for sharing her experience with the House.

[Angela Crawley]

Recently, in this place, I have been making the case that invisible conditions such as fibromyalgia and arthritis do not receive the recognition, the attention or the levels of support that they deserve. The Minister is probably tired of hearing the same voices arguing the case, but I think that Government Departments could do more to recognise not just fibromyalgia and arthritis but all the illnesses, diseases and symptoms that are not currently recognised within the departmental framework.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on initiating the debate.

ME is another of the invisible conditions that are not receiving enough recognition. I understand that the Minister and I are to meet in a couple of weeks to discuss this very issue, but does my hon. Friend agree that such invisible conditions are often not recognised in work capability assessments? Some sort of indicator would be helpful in those circumstances.

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. As the Minister knows, I have highlighted that issue time and again during Westminster Hall debates in relation to ME, fibromyalgia, arthritis and other lesser-known illnesses. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) gave his own personal account, speaking passionately, on behalf of his wife, about fibromyalgia.

What has not been covered so far today, although I assumed that we might hear about it at some point, is the fact that conditions such as anxiety and depression are also deeply misunderstood, although they are often as disabling as a physical illness. Those invisible illnesses exemplify the way in which conditions without obvious symptoms can escape the untrained eye while wreaking havoc on people's lives, but that, too, has not been recognised by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Anxiety and depression are not easy conditions to talk about, and many men suffer quietly with symptoms because they are too afraid to speak up. I think it incumbent on everyone in the House to speak up themselves, and to ensure that people know that it is okay to ask for help. That is because, sadly, the stigma that still exists around too many illnesses can make it very distressing to have to explain and justify the additional needs to loved ones or family members, never mind employers. I know from personal experience of losing a loved one to mental ill health that it is essential that these people have the recognition and support that they deserve, because I would hate to see more people lose their lives unnecessarily.

I have also recently tried to highlight how the cuts to disability benefits by this Government are making it more difficult for disabled people to live independently and with dignity. I see the Minister roll his eyes and I appreciate that he is just one of many Ministers who have taken on this departmental responsibility and I have every sympathy as he has a large ship to steer in the right direction, but the fact of the matter is that the DWP has failed to recognise many of the disabilities today, and if we are going to sit in this House and debate the subject it is only right that we address concerns about things that reside in Government Departments.

Many diagnosed with disability and a persistent long-term health condition can be empowered and enabled to seek the support they require to live a fulfilling and long life, but the reality is that there are higher costs to living with a disability. Many are unable to work, and the difficulties they face in navigating the welfare system can be seen in all our casework. Whether the Minister is willing to acknowledge that is another matter, but it is a simple fact that if we went to any case officer in any constituency we would hear the same problems. Disabled people face overall higher costs than non-disabled people, and the cuts to their income can be devastating because they often do not have savings; they do not have a fall-back. Many do not have a support system, so what does the Minister propose they do if the last people they can turn to are this state and this Government and they are not getting the support they need? The bottom line is that shaking our head and saying it is not the case is simply not good enough. We perhaps only hear the worst of cases, but if we are just hearing some of the worst cases I dread to think how many other people do not come to us, do not know how to be advocates for themselves, and do not know how to get the support they need. I dread to think how they experience the DWP service.

Where there is a gap that is supposed to be plugged by benefits such as the personal independence payment, people instead face the blatant discrimination of a disability assessment. Is it really right that someone should face a panel of people and a medical practitioner to prove an already diagnosed medical condition? Is it really necessary when they have a diagnosed medical condition to then further prove that medical condition to other health practitioners who are often not as qualified as those who made the original diagnosis?

The system is not working for people who need help, and that is because of the ideology of this austerity-driven Government. They are ultimately cutting on the backs of the poor. In 2016 the Government introduced regulations which specifically excluded people with psychological conditions from receiving higher points in PIP assessments. I appreciate that that was not under the Minister's stewardship, but consecutive Ministers who have had responsibility for this area have failed to address these systemic issues.

It took a defeat in the courts for the DWP to overturn this practice. Is it right that public money should be spent trying to defend the indefensible? That demonstrates the direction of the Government, their perspective on disabled people, and their contempt for their additional needs. The DWP looks at the needs of disabled people at arms' length, with assessments contracted to a private company.

While I appreciate that some of the assessors are highly skilled medical professionals who have the empathy required to work in a clinical setting, this is not always the case. Numerous constituents have complained to me of assessors who did not understand their illness and who could not imagine how difficult life is on a bad day with fibromyalgia or depression. They were simply not listened to, and the report they received simply did not reflect their experience of the assessment. Assessors are simply not trained in spotting these illnesses, and that is reflected in the points awarded in their assessment reports. The result is that people in genuine need either have to put up and shut up or they challenge the

outcome through a gruelling mandatory reconsideration and appeals process. The very fact that the outcomes are often overturned at that stage implies that there is a systemic problem with the system. This is a flawed system that needs to be reviewed urgently, and I urge the Minister to take that action.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about PIP assessments. Epilepsy Scotland says that 77% of those who appealed when they lost out on their PIP won on appeal. The DWP denied PIP to over 53% of people living with epilepsy who had previously had DLA, so this absolutely bears out my hon. Friend's point that those with particular conditions such as epilepsy are not being well served by the system.

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree. Fundamentally, this is all I want the Minister to take home today. I genuinely want us to be able to work cross-party across the House to get this right, because this is not simply about levelling this at the Government. We all have a responsibility to make the system work better.

As the Minister knows, I am a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and we have consistently argued that more can be done to support disabled people. I think he would agree that there is always more that we could do within the built environment to support those with a disability. It is often not the disability itself that disabling; it is the built environment and the structures within society that disable the individual.

Bill Grant: Is it not the case that the Scottish Government had the opportunity to recreate a Scottish social security system? The hon. Lady has spent some time berating the current system, yet the opportunity was gifted to the Scottish Government, as it should have been, through devolution.

Angela Crawley: The hon. Gentleman knows fine well that there is a Scottish social security service, and the approval ratings and general success of the implementation of that system provide evidence that where this is done correctly and with an ethos of integrity and respect, it works far better than an interrogative system that implies that people must prove that they are disabled. Frankly, I would expect more from the hon. Gentleman, who often makes the case in this House that it is the responsibility of the Scottish Government and Scottish taxpayers to mitigate this Conservative Government's austerity measures. He knows that that is an inconceivable and ridiculous notion.

Once more, I call on the Government to define specifically what "reasonable adjustments" are, because too many employers are unable to provide the level of support required because "reasonable adjustments" have not been exactly defined. For that matter, the Equality Act 2010 is often not being enforced, particularly across Government Departments and in outside bodies that are accountable to the Government. There is more that the Minister can do to ensure that the Equality Act works for people and that the definition of "reasonable adjustments" is clear so that employers can support people.

We need to have a shift in the way we look at disability in this country. We should commend the companies and employers who are making the changes needed to help disabled people to continue into work, but we also need to ensure that the people who require welfare support

are actually receiving it and not being excluded owing to processes that are not fit for purpose. The Minister has heard me make these asks several times, and I know that he is probably tired of hearing me make them, but I urge him to speak to his colleagues across the Departments—specifically, given his remit, to the Department for Work and Pensions—and to champion reforms with those disabilities in mind. If the true measure of a society can be found in how it treats its weakest members, right now we are coming up short. So, before yet another reshuffle and yet another Prime Minister, I urge this Minister to make a lasting impact and improve the lives of disabled people.

5.38 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): This has been a fantastic, high-quality debate. It is a shame that the attendance was a bit—*[Interruption.]* Yes, it is quality over quantity, which is what we tend to find at the moment. Perhaps other things are going on and focusing minds elsewhere. I would like to begin by thanking my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and for Newport West (Ruth Jones) for securing the debate and for their excellent and passionate opening speeches. They both mentioned Grace and her "have a heart" campaign. That is a fantastic example of a lived experience-led campaign, and they are often the most powerful and successful. I join my hon. Friends in commending Grace and her campaign, which I wish widespread success.

At this juncture, I also want to mention the Changing Places campaign, which I have been involved with in my constituency on behalf of a constituent whose son has spina bifida. I was shocked to find out how few facilities there are across my constituency; no doubt the same applies to all constituencies.

I thank all hon. Members who have taken part today, including the hon. Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant)—*[Interruption.]* I am going to crucify all these constituency names with my Geordie accent. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders)—I just about managed that one—and the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), as well as the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who spoke for the SNP. I thank them all for their excellent speeches.

Members may have noticed that I am not a Department for Work and Pensions shadow Minister—I am shadow Public Health Minister—but I am happy to be closing this debate on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). I do chair the all-party parliamentary group on dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties. Those are also, of course, invisible disabilities; I shall come back to that aspect later.

As we have heard, in the last census, one in five people in the UK reported having a disability or limiting long-term health condition. The vast majority of disabled people have hidden impairments not immediately obvious to others—neurodiversity, Crohn's disease, colitis, dementia, arthritis, or mental distress and energy impairment conditions such as myalgic encephalomyelitis, or ME, and chronic fatigue syndrome, to name but a few.

According to Scope, nearly half the British public are not aware that they even know someone who has a disability. People with invisible impairments face attitudinal

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

barriers in every part of their lives, from accessing public toilets to using disabled parking bays, but I will concentrate mainly on education, access to social security and employment.

People with invisible disabilities often face significant exclusion and stigma in education. For example, the lack of awareness of autism in schools affects autistic students at every level. As a result, fewer than half of children and young people on the autism spectrum say that they are happy in education. SEND provisions are woefully inadequate and have been devastated by brutal cuts to our schools and sixth forms, worth £2 billion per year.

What assessment has the Minister made of the impact funding cuts have on children with autism and their ability to stay in mainstream schools? The issue is about accessibility and access to the curriculum. Autistic children are sometimes forced to wait for more than a year for the SEND support that they need, and just one in 10 parents is satisfied by the education, health and care plan for their child. As I know, children with dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties experience that, too: my son is severely dyslexic, and as I mentioned earlier, I am the chair of the APPG on dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties.

Earlier this year, our group released a report entitled “The Human Cost of Dyslexia—the emotional and psychological impact of poorly supported dyslexia”. It outlined the ways in which missed or poorly supported dyslexia during education has made such children feel stupid, unvalued by society, guilty—as if the problem was their fault—and disinterested in education. The implications can lead to under-achievement at every level of education, in careers and work life thereafter and, at the extreme end, to disengagement from society. That is reflected in the fact that there are proportionately more people with dyslexia in the criminal justice system than among the general population. The same can be said for a number of SEND conditions.

Unfortunately, the issues faced by people with invisible disabilities during childhood do not disappear but actually worsen in adulthood. The employment gap between disabled people and non-disabled people is 30.1 percentage points and has remained just above 30 percentage points for the past decade. This is something that the last Labour Government were trying to tackle. We had the Valuing People Now partnership boards—before he had to dash to a meeting, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) told me that he chaired the successful board in Gateshead—but, sadly, the coalition Government scrapped them in 2012. Three years later, in 2015, the Government pledged to halve the disability employment gap to 15 percentage points. [Interruption.] The Minister is getting frustrated.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Does the hon. Lady not welcome the fact that just short of 1 million more disabled people were in work in the past five years alone and that for the first time ever, which I emphasise, more than half of disabled people are now in work? We have made significant progress. There is much, much more to do, but we are in a significantly better position than we were in 2010.

Mrs Hodgson: I am sure the Minister will be making all those points in his contribution.

The Government pledged to halve the disabled employment gap to 15 percentage points in 2015, but the 2017 Conservative manifesto set a new target to get an extra 1 million disabled people into work by 2027, which is a much downgraded commitment. If that is not the case, will the Minister please clarify the Government’s target and update us on the progress on closing the employment gap? The National Audit Office released a damning report concluding that the DWP lacks any clear measures to support disabled people into work. [Interruption.] It is about accessibility. I cannot see how it is not about this debate.

What will the Government do to ensure that clear measures are put in place to support disabled people, including those with invisible disabilities, into work? A recent TUC survey found that more than two thirds of respondents say there is more stigma for disabled people when their impairment cannot be seen by others in the workplace.

For example, people with autism often face significant stigma and difficulty in work. According to the National Autistic Society, just 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment, compared with 80% of non-disabled people who are in work in the UK. The vast majority of autistic people face a hostile environment in the labour market, and there is an appalling lack of understanding of autism among jobcentre staff, disability employment advisers and some employers. The same goes for the police and the criminal justice system, which can lead to autistic people being wrongfully arrested when their only crime is being autistic. What will the Government do to ensure better understanding of autism across society?

The Government’s Disability Confident scheme lacks any credible performance measures to ensure that employers support disabled people into work, and it is possible to reach level 3 accreditation without actually employing a single disabled person. Is that something the Government will review?

People with fibromyalgia, which as we have heard is an invisible disability affecting up to 1 million people in the UK, also fall victim to barriers in the labour market. Under this Government, fibromyalgia sufferers face a lack of proper understanding of their condition, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston, as well as a lack of vital in-work support. Only 63% of people with musculoskeletal conditions are in work, with many forced out of work by the difficulties of daily life due to their invisible disability.

The Access to Work scheme could play a vital part in ensuring that employers provide valuable reasonable adjustments in the workplace for people with invisible disabilities. However, a survey conducted by Versus Arthritis found that just 59% of respondents with conditions such as fibromyalgia and only 41% of employers are aware of the scheme. What steps can the Minister take to ensure that employers are aware of the scheme and to encourage take-up?

As we have heard during the debate, assessments for PIP, employment and support allowance and universal credit are failing people with invisible impairments such as mental health problems and mental distress. The Time to Change campaign has reported that 90% of people with mental distress have experienced stigma,

including in employment and in accessing social security support. The current assessment framework fundamentally discriminates against people with mental distress, and I am sure that we will all have constituents who have experienced this and felt overwhelmed by the process. The process begins with an arduous written assessment, which is 34 pages long in the case of PIP. That is followed by the collation of medical evidence, which can involve travelling extensively, liaising with different health services and facing huge expense. Finally, there is an often invalidating and often humiliating face-to-face assessment.

In 2013, an upper tribunal panel said that the design of the work capability assessment substantially disadvantaged mental health claimants, as it relied upon the self-reporting of a disability. In 2017, the Government changed the eligibility criteria for the PIP mobility component, to exclude certain people undertaking journeys who are facing “overwhelming psychological distress”. These changes, which were ruled to be unlawfully discriminatory by a High Court and which will take years to complete, prove, once again, the DWP’s shocking disregard for people with mental distress. Some 220,000 people are owed back payments by the DWP, but thus far the Government have only reviewed 10% of cases. When does the Minister expect to have reviewed all these cases?

It is clear from this debate that people with invisible disabilities face stigma in all areas of their lives. That is due not only to the chronic lack of knowledge and awareness of invisible disabilities across society, but to the Government’s cruel loopholes that discriminate against people with invisible disabilities. I hope that the Minister will take on board everything he has heard today. I know he probably is not happy with what he has heard from me, but there we are.

5.52 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): It is a real pleasure to respond to this proactive and constructive debate. Until the last two, the majority of speakers stuck to the spirit of this incredibly important subject, and I know that people worked incredibly hard to get this vital debate secured through the Backbench Business Committee. First, I say to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), “Yes, yes and yes.” How about that? There are not many debates in which a Minister can just totally and wholeheartedly agree.

I had a stroke of luck, because on Saturday a Red Box was dispatched to my house. We knew this debate was coming up, so a 3,500-word draft speech was prepared and there was a lot of briefing on what subjects would be covered. I thought that the best thing to do was to pop the kettle on, have a cup of tea and look at something else first. As I did so, I found an invitation to a meeting of the all-party group on this very subject on Tuesday. As a matter of luck, I was therefore able to attend a brilliant meeting to discuss exactly what would be coming forward. I had further luck, as the various areas of priority for us were then connected to three further meetings I had later in the week, prior to this debate, and I will be covering all those in a little more detail.

There is a huge amount of respect for the hon. Gentleman, who has built a brilliant reputation in this area for a long time, both in his role before he came to the House and in the House. He is widely respected and

he is right to recognise the progress that has been made since the Equality Act 2010. I pay tribute to the Labour party for its work in that area. Our Government has rightly continued, as I am sure all future Governments will, to work with stakeholders to build on that incredibly important step, which does make a real difference.

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that we need to improve awareness. He talked about how 93% of people who challenge feel that they are doing the right thing because they want to stand up for those who are marginalised in society, and I am acutely aware of that point. This was summed up by an incident I saw where someone with a disabled autistic daughter parked in a disabled parking space, with a blue badge, yet received abuse.

It was not a one-off—I am sure it happens all over the place. On that stat—93% of people would challenge someone—they probably feel that they are doing the right thing, but because of the lack of awareness and the additional challenges of hidden disabilities, society is creating awkwardness and putting people off and that is affecting people’s lives.

I shall come shortly to Grace, the inspiration, but first let me whizz through some of the excellent speeches and respond to them directly. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) has done brilliant work, both in her constituency with the partnership board and in her former role as everybody’s favourite sports Minister. When I was previously a disability Minister, we worked together carefully to push organisations such as the Premier League, which was, to its credit, very proactive. Richard Scudamore, the departing chief executive, took a personal interest in improving disability access in premier league stadiums. I could not have asked for more support from the sports Minister in that policy area.

My hon. Friend was absolutely right to highlight the importance of the Special Olympics. The point that I really picked up on was just how happy people are—in all the visits in my 19 years as an MP, a Minister and a councillor, nothing has come close to the joy that I saw when I went to a learning disability netball session. I literally thought that the young adults were going to explode with excitement. I am glad that my hon. Friend also took the time to highlight the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who has done a huge amount in this policy area.

The hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) has made a good impression since her recent arrival in the House, from which we are all benefiting. This is the second debate to which she has contributed and I have responded. She brings real-life experience in this area, particularly in respect of strokes, and it was really important to highlight that. She reminds us how important it is that we do this because some people will need extra time and space. That is crucial.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) led a brilliant Westminster Hall debate just a few weeks ago and carried on today in the same form. Not every disability is visible. He was right to highlight that there is not an immense cost to making a real difference in this policy area. That came through in many speeches, and I will cover it in more detail later.

Through the direct experiences of his wife, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) raised some incredibly important points about access to

[Justin Tomlinson]

work and sanctions. He has raised them before in other debates and he always raises them in a constructive manner. I want to try to keep to the spirit of the debate, so I offer him a personal meeting so that we can explore the issues in more detail and do them justice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) was absolutely right to highlight the challenges in respect of public transport, an area on which she has worked tirelessly. She also raised the issue of assistance dogs, on which British Guide Dogs has been one of the best and most visible campaigning charities, particularly in respect of the misunderstanding of what taxi drivers should or should not do and how we can tighten things up through licensing. My hon. Friend was also right to highlight the brilliance of medical dogs that can smell certain conditions—it is the equivalent of detecting one particle in a swimming pool, which is absolutely amazing. What a difference we can also make in the retail environment, which I will cover a little later.

Perhaps the hon. Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) did not quite follow the spirit of the debate—that is one of the challenges when one arrives with a pre-written speech. I gently say to them that we are spending £55 billion a year on supporting those with long-term health conditions and disabilities. That is a record amount and is up £10 billion. Only 16% of DLA claimants had the highest rate of support, compared with 32% of those on PIP. Disability employment is at a record high: in respect of our target of 1 million by 2027, we are at 440,000 after two years. As I said in an intervention earlier, for the first time we have more disabled people in work than not in work. There is still more to do, though, specifically for people with autism in jobcentres. I am grateful for the work of Autism Alliance UK, which helped to create the autism toolkit. In the spirit of the debate, I am happy to meet both Members to discuss all those issues in detail, but will keep to the theme—

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) *rose*—

Justin Tomlinson: Let me keep to the spirit of the debate.

This debate has happened because of Grace Warnock, a truly inspirational superstar who had a fantastic teacher, who can take some credit for starting this brilliant journey. She is an amazing young person dealing with the challenges of Crohn's disease. She was targeted with abuse because of her hidden disability. Understandably, many people, including many of us, would have shied away. I am sure that, day in, day out, people are shying away, but she stood her ground and she has made a difference. We should all celebrate her courage. I am very proud that she was awarded the Prime Minister's Points of Light award in 2018—the very least that we can collectively do to celebrate her brilliance. It is absolutely right that her energy, enthusiasm and ideas are used to drive us forward.

Sense sent us all a briefing in which it summed up why we should listen carefully to Grace. It said that many public facilities are not currently fully accessible. Many people have multiple complex and/or invisible disabilities and require greater support and accessibility in order to access the local community, but these facilities

are often not provided. Change could include the invisible disability sign, greater Changing Places provisions, improved accessible public transport and greater staff awareness for people working in public places. Greater provision of such facilities would lead to better inclusion and help to improve attitudes towards disabled people. Every one of us in this place would agree with every word of that.

That brings me to the all-party group meeting that I attended only yesterday. It was fantastic to see such cross-party support and some really impressive individuals making a difference in an area which, as the hon. Member for East Lothian rightly highlighted, is complex. We all agree that we want Grace's sign to be a stepping stone to improved signage that is internationally recognised but, as ever, it is not simple. Everything in the political environment takes a little bit longer than perhaps we would like. To get international recognition of a new symbol involves a process with various stages from the initial proposals, through to consensus building, public consultation and publication. It can take a number of years, but that does ensure that, when it is done, it is done properly and is of long standing.

In our country, the British Standards Institution, the UK national standards body, in effect audits and approves something before it is considered by the International Organization for Standardization. The APPG gave an update and a presentation on the work that is being done and I was thrilled that the BSI was fully involved and fully supportive. It is right to highlight those people, beyond the MPs on the APPG, who have done so much work. Lucy Richards, the designer, has taken on Grace's idea to international stellar levels. I was incredibly impressed by that. Having run a marketing company, it gave me a warm glow to remember the joys of looking at designs. There has been support from Life Changes through Anna Buchan, who provided the funding needed to carry out that extensive work. I should also mention user experts such as Dr Gordon Hayward, Steve Milton and Robert Turpin from the BSI. We had all the movers and shakers making sure that this has been fully road tested, so that when we are ready to take it to the international standards organisation it will tick all of the boxes. I thank the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who were all present and supportive of that vital work. I will do everything that I can to support that going forward.

I did say that I was lucky with the other meetings that came up. This week, I met various sector champions who are helping to represent all of us to challenge those particular areas to do more and to highlight best practice. The first of those was retail sector champion Samantha Sen. Many of the speakers today have talked about the importance of getting it right in retail. That highlights the fact that this is a win, win. This is not just for those with hidden disabilities. If retailers can get it right, they can access the combined spending power of disabled people, which stands at £249 billion—those 13 million disabled people have considerable spending power.

Seventy-five per cent. of disabled people and their families have left a shop because of poor customer service. I do not believe that there is a single retailer who wakes up in the morning and says, "I want to turn away business." I do not think that, on any of our visits, we

have ever had a retailer saying, “I have too much business. Please do less.” I had the pleasure this morning of speaking at and opening the Retail Forum, at which many of the leading retailers and estate owners—including British Land and the Crown Estate—were present. They absolutely buy into this. They have a real appetite for sharing best practice. It is being channelled through the Purple Tuesday campaign, which many MPs support. On 12 November, we will have a genuine focus on this issue. When they set that up, they expected 70 retailers to be involved; it was actually over 700, and this year they expect it to be over 900. That is making a difference in retail and I commend all those retailers for being so engaged.

I also met Stephen Brookes, who is our transport sector champion. Many people will have worked with him on his brilliant work to tackle disability hate crime, which made a real difference to the Government’s way of going forward. He has real expertise; he initially started with the challenges on the Blackpool buses and spread out to rail and buses across the whole country. Part of the way through our conversation—this was amazing—I said I had been to an all-party parliamentary group that was beginning to look at how we can improve signage. I said, “One of the things I would like you to do is to meet the members of the APPG to give your expertise.” He said, “I have got something to show you. I have seen a sign that is amazing,” and he brought out the sign that had been presented at the all-party parliamentary group. He has confirmed that he would be delighted to support the APPG’s work. That will build on the Government’s new inclusive transport strategy to create a transport system that provides equal access for disabled people by 2030. That is a really important area, because disabled people should be able to travel confidently, easily and without extra cost.

Stephen Brookes reassured me that, over the last three years, there has been a complete shift, particularly with the rail companies and providers such as Network Rail. Any of their major improvements now have to go through their built environment access panel, for which there is a pan-disability group, to make sure they get things right for everyone and that they get them right at the beginning—it is a lot easier to do that than it is to retrospectively fix things. I was encouraged that so many providers have understood the importance of this issue.

I also met Andrew Miller, who is our arts and culture sector champion. He, again, talked about the huge progress that is being made in our cultural venues and our live music venues. I pay tribute to Attitudes is Everything, one of my favourite charities, which makes live music venues accessible. When I was first a disability Minister, and I insisted on having a picture of Attitudes is Everything, my officials airbrushed out the pint glasses some of its members were enjoying as part of their evening entertainment, saying that that probably was not right for a ministerial wall. I got that corrected and the picture was put back in place.

I understand the importance of this issue, given that my first graduate job was as a nightclub manager. *[Interruption.]* There are not many who could say that. *[Interruption.]* Mr Deputy Speaker has suggested that that was maybe because I liked dancing; actually, I was probably a manager because I was not very good at dancing. Andrew Miller and I talked in detail about what more all these venues, which an individual may

visit only once or twice, could do. Many now put a lot of additional information up in advance on their websites so that users can check. What disabled users do not want to do is travel all the way to a venue and be left red faced when the facilities are not accessible.

I had a look at a website, which looked, in theory, like it was following good practice. It talked about free admission for carers or helpers; free loan of a wheelchair or motorised scooter; providing a personalised guiding scheme for unaccompanied disabled people, as long as it was booked in advance; subtitled video and large print being available; low-level counters; the induction loop system; and guide, hearing and assistance dogs being welcome. However, there was not a single point of contact, and probably the most important thing that any retailer or leisure provider can do is make it crystal clear that there is one. Those with disabilities do not fit into a neat box—everybody has their own unique challenges—and being able to talk things through and knowing where to go if there is a problem can make a real difference. It can also benefit facilities, which can then tap those 13 million customers with their £249 billion.

Finally, I met Huw Edwards, who is our physical activity and leisure sector champion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford highlighted the importance of sport, I pay tribute to Sport England for doing lots more to focus on opportunities for those with disabilities, recognising the importance of sport and physical activity for disabled people through the Sporting Future strategy. I welcome the fact that we are seeing increases in activity. Again, there is still lots more to do, but it is right that we promote opportunities and share best practice. So many want to do more but need this information.

As I initially indicated with my triple yes, I am keen to do everything I can, as quickly as possible, to get this. I was blown away yesterday when I saw the designs and the right balance of the imagery, dealing with all the competing demands across the pan-disability spectrum and getting more detail with the words. I think this will make a real difference. As was said, not all things have to cost a huge amount of money. On this issue, everybody will do everything they can to make sure that Grace’s brave stand really does make a difference, not just in the UK but internationally.

It has been a real pleasure to take part in such a constructive and positive debate. Parliament is at its best today.

6.10 pm

Martin Whitfield: It is right to say that we have seen Parliament at its best today. There are many distractions—shall we call them?—that take up political time. I know that Members from all parts of the House are doing other work today. Nevertheless, over 50 Members from across the whole House supported the application for this Backbench Business debate. It is right that the message should go out from here today that this is a cross-party ask and a cross-party right. I go back to the discussion about symbols: it is a symbol of how important this place feels our disabled community are, because they are an essential part of our society and we are stronger for them.

I thank all the Members who spoke and intervened. I finish with the words of the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant)—my hon. Friend—

[Martin Whitfield]

although not the ones he may think I will finish on. He said that this is the kind thing to do. As Grace said, it is about letting people have a heart about our whole society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered invisible disabilities and accessibility challenges.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (Extension of duration of non-jury trial provisions) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 30 April, be approved.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 to 8 together.

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS – CREWE) BILL

Ordered,

That the High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

CHURCH REPRESENTATION AND MINISTERS MEASURE

Ordered,

That the Measure passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, entitled Church Representation and Ministers Measure (HC 2167), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Wednesday 12 June, paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to the Motions in the name of the Leader of the Opposition as if the day were an Opposition Day; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption and for up to six hours from the commencement of proceedings on the first such Motion and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

PETITIONS

School Funding

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We now come to the petitions. I hope that Mr Gwynne is not going to read the individual names out.

6.12 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I rise—with a bad back—to present a petition organised by my formidable constituents, Megan Montgomery, Amanda Baxter and the parents and supporters of Vale View Primary School in Reddish.

Vale View is one of 26 schools across England where it is proposed to close early on a Friday in order to cut costs. According to the independent School Cuts campaign, Vale View, like every other school in the borough of Stockport, has seen a massive reduction in funding since 2015. At Vale View, it is £430,122, or a £446 per-pupil drop in funding. This is not on. I support the parents in their protest and take pride in presenting their mammoth petition. I hope that Ministers take note of the strength of feeling on this issue and act.

The petition reads:

The petition of parents, families and carers of pupils at Vale View Primary School, Reddish,

Declares that Vale View Primary School, Mill Lane in Reddish is trying to close early on Friday afternoons to save money meaning that parents will either have to leave work early to pick their children up, or pay for child care in school; further that it will disrupt children's learning; further that Vale View is not the only school proposing this; further that schools across the country are affected thanks to real terms funding cuts of £2.5bn; further that schools are being asked to make cuts to staffing, drop subjects and other activities and are asking parents to chip in to help run them; further that we think it's ridiculous that in 2019 schools are being forced to shut their doors early, or cut entire subjects because the government won't give them the money they need; further that investment in schools is investment in our children's future; further notes a related online petition—

now printed out—

on this same matter that has received 113,610 signatures; and further that the government should be doing everything it can to make sure children in England have the best start in life and the best education to help them succeed.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to ask the government to increase funding for schools, so they can afford the staff and equipment they need without taking cost saving measures like cutting school hours.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002458]

Nnamani family, Glasgow

6.15 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I think the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) needed a manual handling course or risk assessment before presenting that petition.

I rise on behalf of the residents of Glasgow South West, who are among the most sophisticated electorates in these islands. They have organised a petition on behalf of Mary Nnamani and her family, who are well known to the constituency office staff, charities in Glasgow South West and the Church community. I want to pay particular tribute to the Hastie family and the parishioners of Our Lady and St George's, who have helped to organise this petition of 387 signatures over one week.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow South West

Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002459]

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Further to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), I rise in support of Mary Nnamani and her children. I pay tribute to the parishioners of Our Lady and St George's who have gathered this petition. It is clear from their support that this is a valued family within the community. Glasgow is their home, and the community very much want them to stay. It is greatly frustrating to see further Home Office misery put upon the people of Glasgow. I would like to thank those from my constituency who have signed the petition, and particularly Grace Buckley, who is incredibly active in Glasgow in supporting human rights causes in the city and around the world.

The petition reads:

The petition of residents of Glasgow Central

Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002460]

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I want to add my congratulations to and admiration of the parishioners of Our Lady and St George's in Penilee, who have so efficiently organised this petition, and particularly my constituents among their number who have signed it. The case of Mary Nnamani and her family clearly demonstrates that the hostile environment is alive and well. I hope that this and so many other cases will be urgently reviewed and that that policy will eventually come to an end.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North

Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part

of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002461]

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I rise in solidarity with the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and all his constituents, particularly the parishioners of Our Lady and St George's in Penilee. As we see so often, it is churches that are performing the role in the community of providing solidarity, sustenance and moral support to so many people in our communities who are victims of the oppressive behaviour of the Home Office. The Home Office is denying the basic rights of justice and sanctuary to those who have fled to this country seeking asylum, and who are often facing the worst possible conditions and psychological torment. It is great that this act of solidarity across parties and across the city of Glasgow can, I hope, bring some degree of encouragement and, thankfully, some respite to a family who are facing such torment at this point in time.

I present this petition on behalf of the constituents of Glasgow North East. The petition reads:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North East,

Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002462]

Funeral Plans: Regulation

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

6.21 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker for granting me this opportunity to raise the important issue of funeral plan regulation again in the House. Much has changed since the last time I brought a debate on funeral plan regulation to the Chamber. I will go into more detail regarding what has happened in the industry shortly, but first I want to explain why this is such an important issue and why action is so important.

Pre-paid funeral plans allow consumers to save for a funeral. If they are sold and handled appropriately, they are a good thing. They allow people to purchase a funeral and secure it at today's prices. They can avoid the double-whammy shock of losing a loved one and dealing with the financial consequences of a funeral at the same time. Alongside appropriate regulation of the funeral industry itself and the wider anti-poverty work that is required, funeral plans are the best route to avoiding funeral poverty.

I proposed a ten-minute rule Bill in December 2016, as I want to see better regulation of this market. The debate in 2016 followed a report from Citizens Advice Scotland that same year, commissioned by the Scottish Government, on funeral poverty. It made a series of recommendations regarding the action required to stop funeral poverty. Many of them were devolved responsibilities that are now being pursued by the Scottish Government, but some were issues reserved to Westminster, including this one of the regulation of funeral plans. That report, with its case studies of people being mis-sold funeral plans, and representations made to me by constituents prompted me to ask this Government whether they should be doing more. According to UK Government figures, about 200,000 funeral plans are sold each year, and I expect that figure to continue to rise.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: By all means. [*Interruption.*]

Jim Shannon: Mr Deputy Speaker, I did seek the hon. Gentleman's permission beforehand, so I have done this the right way.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, who so often brings to an Adjournment debate many important political issues that we are all involved in and which I am aware of as well. I know of many people who immediately began a funeral payment policy when they retired, yet this has proved to be a negative move for many families. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, while it is admirable that 95% of funeral plan providers are signed up to regulation by the Funeral Planning Authority, the fact that this is completely self-regulated takes some of the sting out of the tail? I believe there is also a role for the Government to play, perhaps in stronger legislation to protect the elderly and the vulnerable from being taken advantage of as they come towards the end of their life.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and it would not be an Adjournment debate without his intervening.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, which is the current status of the Funeral Planning Authority, which I will come on to discuss in greater detail in my speech. He is right that it is a voluntary body at the moment, and there has been much debate about whether the best route of regulating this market is through putting the FPA on a statutory footing or through Financial Conduct Authority regulation. The Government appear to be looking at FCA regulation, which I am happy enough with, although I do have some concerns about the direction of travel, which I will ask the Minister to look at. The hon. Gentleman is right. At the moment, the FPA perhaps does not have the teeth to regulate the market properly. It would acknowledge that although it has done a great deal of work in this area since my ten-minute rule Bill was introduced, if it were to have a full suite of powers to regulate the market properly, that would require it to become a statutory body.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is right. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) brings a great number of important issues to the Chamber, and this is one on which he has spoken many times. He will be pleased to know that this week I heard from a local family-run funeral service in my constituency, who expressed support for the Treasury proposals and for enhanced consumer protection. He made the point that most funeral firms, as we know from the Treasury proposals, are small and micro businesses. He is concerned, given that the majority of funerals are delivered by those businesses, that such businesses could be at competitive disadvantage compared with larger providers and threatened by the cost of FCA regulations. What are my hon. Friend's thoughts on that?

Neil Gray: I am well aware of that family-run business, and I share its concerns. My hon. Friend speaks well for them, and it is a point that I wish to make. How do the Government protect competition in the market to make sure that smaller funeral providers and funeral plan providers are not squeezed out of the market by the burden of FCA regulation? Of all the criticisms of the route that the Government have chosen, that is the one that is expressed most keenly by people in the market.

Given the number of funeral plans that have been sold in recent years and the growth in the sector, it is critical that we get the regulation right and ensure that consumers are protected. The Citizens Advice report published a few years ago gave examples of mis-selling—people were promised particular aspects of a funeral, but when the plan was redeemed they were told that that was not part of the deal. Particular cars, coffins or flowers that were chosen for sentimental reasons, for example, were not delivered, although people thought they had paid for them. There have been widespread reports of bad sales practices such as cold calling, aggressive selling and the targeting of vulnerable customers.

Since I introduced my ten-minute rule Bill, which proposed the areas of regulation that the Government now appear to have adopted, a significant amount of change has taken place in the market. The FPA, as I have said, has taken great steps to reform its practices as a voluntary market regulator, and it suggests that 95% of the market has signed up to its regulatory model. There have been great moves across the market to reform practices, including by plan providers themselves.

Some of them are moving away from the third-party selling model that appeared to be problematic and was part of the 5% issue that concerns us all. I am pleased that my Bill proposal, which was intended to spark debate and action for change, has led to that progress. I am grateful to the Minister for taking action.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate on a subject that is close to my heart. I met him, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and other Members attending this debate to form a working party, and we intend to consider how we support the Government in looking at environmental funerals, funeral plans and the social fund. While I welcome the Government's announcement, does the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) agree that we need to look at the small percentage of funeral plans that are not covered by the FPA? In that two-year window, there is an opportunity for people who can least afford to pay exorbitant fees to be exploited.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Lady, who is a doughty campaigner in this area, for her intervention. It should go without saying that she has done a great deal, particularly on children's funerals, and I commend her for her work. She is absolutely right. There is a potential gap, with the two or three-year transition period the Government propose, before moving to FCA regulation. I will turn to my concerns about that in due course, but she is absolutely right to raise the issue and I look forward to continuing to work with her in this area to try to drive the changes we want.

I am pleased that my Bill proposal, which was intended to spark debate and action for change, has started that progress. I commend the Minister in particular. I am grateful that the Government are taking this issue seriously enough to consult on funeral plan regulation and are now proposing moving to a model of FCA regulation. A consultation is now under way until August on what the Government now propose to do in this area. I am grateful to the Minister and to some of his colleagues who also wish to see change and have supported my work, such as the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), but I do have some concerns about the direction of travel that I am sure the Minister will be able to answer.

There should be some clear benefits to moving to FCA regulation, such as access to the Financial Ombudsman Service for those who have complaints about the products they have received, but it is not yet clear whether consumers who have a dispute over a funeral plan product will be able to access the financial services compensation scheme.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and, more importantly, on his Bill. Has he noticed how funeral costs and some of the practices that go on in the industry are now being highlighted in the press? Does he not agree that there should be a good look at costs in more depth? Very often, bereaved families feel ashamed to raise the question of cost, because there is the matter of pride.

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who raises an important issue. He might be aware that the Scottish Government are doing some work in this regard to set up a funerals regulator, part of which will

be looking at the practices of funeral directors. I believe—I will turn to this in my speech—that that is probably what the Competition and Markets Authority investigation will be looking at, too. It is also right to acknowledge that many family-run funeral directors are linchpins of their communities. Some take on great burdens, acknowledging the hardships their customers are going through. It is right that we acknowledge that, while also accepting that there are some in the market who are not perhaps operating to the qualities that we would hope and expect to see.

On the financial services compensation scheme issue, I hope the Minister will be able to clarify in his response whether he envisages this particular model of regulation covering the financial services compensation scheme.

I am also concerned that although the Government appear very keen to move forward to a different regulatory model, as they have accepted there is a problem, they have not, in their own work, quantified the consumer detriment in the market. There was clearly a problem identified by Citizens Advice Scotland researchers in 2016, but to what extent has that problem been improved or exacerbated? The Government need to do a bit more work to update the findings of the Citizens Advice Scotland report and also the "Fairer Finance" report that followed my 10-minute rule Bill. It is clear that there are still issues in the market that need to be addressed, but I think the Minister must agree that it is for the Government now to quantify what they are so that the FCA is clear as to its remit and focus.

There also needs to be greater clarity on the likely three-year wait for changes to take effect. First of all, what happens with regulation in the interim, as there will be no incentive for those currently signed up to the voluntary scheme to carry on engaging? There certainly will not be an incentive for those outside FPA regulation—those we really wish to target in whatever model of regulation we bring forward—to come on board. What assurances can the Minister give about what the market will look like and how it will behave during the three-year wait until the FCA fully takes up responsibility for the market? Will the Minister say how many firms will be regulated under the scheme? The Treasury's consultation document accepts that there will be consolidation in the market, as my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) suggested. In other words, there will be fewer companies offering these services because of the burden of FCA regulation. Has the Minister assessed whether he feels this model would continue to provide appropriate competition in the market for the consumer? Of course, the Competition and Markets Authority has been critical of some bigger funeral companies for inflated funeral costs, yet this move may give an even bigger market share to those same companies.

I do not have a crystal ball or any insider knowledge, but I fully expect the CMA to follow the Scottish Government's lead by recommending a funeral regulator, which will look after the funeral director industry and probably some of the at-need market. That means we will be left either with a bit of a crossover in regulation or blurred lines as to who will have overall regulatory responsibility. Perhaps the Minister can clarify how he sees the regulatory environment working when both these areas are established.

In conclusion, for the last three years I have been working across this House, with the funeral plan market and with campaigning organisations to ensure that

[Neil Gray]

consumers are protected from being ripped off when they are perhaps at their most vulnerable. I want to see a system of regulation that stops the outrageous practices that we have had reports of in recent years, and I want to see consumer confidence so that there is a greater uptake of funeral plans to avoid the growing problem of funeral poverty.

I am greatly heartened by the Government's acknowledging that they share my concerns and have effectively taken on my ten-minute rule Bill. I thank the Minister and his officials for what they have done to date, but I hope he will also accept that there is a great deal of work still to do and many questions to answer. Above all else, we have to ensure that the regulatory system in place for this critical industry gets it right for consumers. That means ensuring that we have consumer protection from cold calling, greater transparency in pricing, greater transparency in the products on offer and a better link between some plan providers and the funeral directors. There needs to be greater recourse to pursue complaints and to be compensated when things go wrong.

I am not particularly bothered about who from which body has responsibility for the regulation at the end of the day. I just want to make sure that it is right and that it stops people being ripped off and funeral poverty being exacerbated. We must therefore look at where problems remain with similar issues in the over-50s plan market, which is under FCA regulation, and learn lessons for funeral plan regulation.

Thank you again, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate. I want to know from the Minister that the FCA will always see this area as a priority and that he is alive to the concerns I have expressed this evening, while accepting my thanks for pursuing this matter in the way he has.

6.36 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this debate, and I thank him for all the work that he has done on this topic with his colleagues. I hope that today marks a significant moment, following the excellent work that he has undertaken. I acknowledge the ambiguities that exist at this time. Although I will try to address a number of them in my response, I invite him to meet me and officials to go through them in detail so that we can fully absorb his concerns.

I also acknowledge the work that has been undertaken by other Members who have spoken in the debate, including, in particular, that done by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has an ongoing interest in this topic. I mention particularly the work that she has done with the children's funeral fund. I hope that her Adjournment debate on 1 May, with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), was of assistance.

On Sunday, I launched a consultation that outlines the Government's proposal to bring all funeral plan providers within the remit of the Financial Conduct Authority. I will take this opportunity to outline the rationale behind that announcement and do my best to respond to the questions that have been raised.

Sadly, many of us in the Chamber will have had to plan a funeral for a loved one. It is a difficult, emotional and expensive experience, with an average funeral costing between £4,000 and £6,000. For the last 14 years, funeral costs have been rising at twice the rate of inflation—about 6% per annum—so it is understandable that people wish to make some of the arrangements in advance, giving them the peace of mind that their loved ones will not be left with difficult decisions or a large bill after they have passed on. Funeral plans allow people to make these arrangements, to pay for their funeral in advance and to lock in a price. The market for funeral plans has grown considerably in recent years, with sales rising by nearly 200% between 2006 and 2018. Almost 1.4 million plans are now held by individuals up and down the country.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts asked about the Government's perception of what this intervention will do to the market. That is difficult to anticipate at this point, but we will look carefully at the responses throughout the consultation, which runs up to 25 August, and will be alive to those concerns. The huge growth in the market, combined with a largely voluntary regulatory framework, has given rise to some pretty shameful practices, with some companies taking advantage of people only trying to do the right thing by their families. It is clear that the market has outgrown the 18-year-old legislative framework and that more robust regulation is needed, as the hon. Gentleman explained to the House more than two and a half years ago.

I will briefly describe the current framework. At present, funeral plan providers who offer plans backed by either a trust or an insurance contract are excluded from FCA regulation. It appears that all funeral plan providers have structured their business such that they benefit from these exclusions. A system of voluntary regulation has been established by the FPA, which has done some good work covering about 95% of the market, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, but the reports of poor practice have largely come from providers that are not FPA members. A system that allows market participants to choose whether to be regulated cannot be sustainable for a market of this size and nature—we are talking about £3.5 billion being invested by 1.3 million people—because only the reputable firms will choose to comply.

For these reasons and following reports of poor practice, I launched a call for evidence in June last year on the regulation of the funeral plan market. The Government sought views and evidence on how the market was operating and on the Government's initial policy proposal to bring funeral plan providers within the FCA's remit. In the light of the evidence received, it is clear that consumer detriment is present in the market, both at the point of sale and afterwards. At the point of sale, some providers and their distributors use high-pressure and misleading sales tactics to promote and sell funeral plans. Given the context—what these individuals are trying to do at a difficult time in their lives—that is particularly unacceptable. Standards of disclosure are also poor, leaving people unsure of what is included in their plan.

We have also found that after a plan has been purchased some providers remove high upfront costs in the form of commission or administration fees, which have been as high as £800, leading to concerns about whether there will be enough money left to pay for the funeral.

Some funeral directors have also been named on plans without their knowledge or prior consent, and in some circumstances this has led to an alternative funeral director being appointed, with customers at that vulnerable time left confused about who will conduct the funeral service. There is also anecdotal evidence of conflicts of interest within some trusts' investment strategies, and there are clear signs that consumers are being disadvantaged.

Perhaps the most striking finding, however, was that 84% of respondents agreed that regulation must be made compulsory, so there is clear demand from the market itself for enhanced regulation. Action must and will be taken. Consumers need to understand the products they buy and be confident they are well regulated. This should have wider benefits beyond the immediate funeral plan sector. Research by the CMA, which is investigating the wider market, has found that the vast majority of people do not shop around for a funeral, which is entirely understandable following a bereavement. A properly regulated funeral plan sector that enables people to plan ahead with confidence and shop around should have knock-on effects for competition in the wider funeral sector.

The FCA is best placed to take on responsibility for regulating the sector, although I acknowledge the concern about the cost and nature of that regulation and would be happy to discuss that with the hon. Gentleman in a meeting. We need to get that right, given the wide range of small family providers, and to make sure it is appropriate. The FCA would be obliged to consult on that. It is none the less a well-established regulator, accustomed to taking strong regulatory action when necessary, and it has the appropriate rule-making powers to tackle the conduct and prudential concerns that are identified in the market. It will be able to develop a targeted and proportionate approach to regulating the market, in line with its statutory objectives.

My Department has developed a full legislative proposal to bring funeral plans within the FCA's remit. That framework will ensure that the Government meet their three stated objectives for the regulation of the funeral plan market. First, all funeral plan providers and their distributors will be subject to robust conduct standards via FCA rules. Secondly, the FCA will have the necessary powers to tackle the prudential concerns in the market. Finally—this was raised by the hon. Gentleman—consumers will have access to the Financial Ombudsman Service if things go wrong.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) referred to compensation. I want to ask Minister about this because it was discussed at the working group today. If someone pays for a funeral plan and the firm that takes the money goes bust or ceases to operate, will there be a method whereby people can get their money back?

John Glen: That would be resolved by the process in which we are currently engaged—the consultation process, and the proposals for legislation in the autumn—and my expectation is that that is what we shall be aiming for.

We should set the framework for a market that functions more fairly and in the interests of consumers. The future regulatory framework for funeral plans was set out, in detail, in a consultation that I launched on Sunday. The consultation will run for 12 weeks, and it will give stakeholders an opportunity to comment on the proposed legislative framework before the Government consider the responses and finalise their proposed approach.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts asked an important question about what would happen during the gap between now and the introduction of the full new regulations. Whatever regulatory route is chosen, a transition will be necessary. FCA regulation can be carried out via secondary legislation and will therefore be quickest. The membership of the existing regulatory authority—the self-defining one—clearly has some reputational benefits in the interim, and I would encourage consumers to use the FPA-regulated providers during that period. I recognise that there is a dispute about the most appropriate way forward. That is what the consultation will be about, and the Government will reflect carefully before presenting proposals.

I hope that I have responded adequately to the points that have been raised. I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions to the debate. This is a very important issue involving real human misery, and as the hon. Gentleman has said, what was happening was an outrage. I am determined that we will get this right for our constituents across the country and leave the market in a far better state.

Question put and agreed to.

6.48 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 5 June 2019

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

Industrial Strategy: North-East of England

9.30 am

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered industrial strategy in the North East of England.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am delighted to have been granted this debate on such a crucial subject for our region. There are two local enterprise partnerships in the north-east, so we have two local industrial strategies: one for seven north-east local authorities, and one for the Tees valley. My area is covered by the North East LEP, which leads on the creation of the local industrial strategy, as its footprint includes two combined authorities: the newly created North of Tyne combined authority and the North East combined authority. As the North of Tyne combined authority has a devolution deal that specifically refers to the LIS, the picture is a little more complicated than elsewhere, as the Minister will appreciate. However, both combined authorities are working together, and with businesses and partners and through the LEP board, to make sure the local industrial strategy makes sense for residents and businesses in the north-east.

I will not talk about the north-east's fantastic industrial and inventive past, because we see that backward look too often in the region, and although it is important to recognise that we have been passionate, ambitious and innovative for hundreds of years, looking back does a disservice to the brilliant people and businesses that we have today. It does not highlight the fact that the north-east has proportionally more businesses in manufacturing—10.5% against 7.7% nationally—or the fact that in 2018, the growth in the number of businesses massively outstripped what was happening nationally; we had 14.2% growth, versus a national fall of 0.5%, and we have seen a growth in productivity since 2014. Those are positive things, but that is not to detract from the less positive things happening in the region that I think my colleagues will talk about.

Looking back would not highlight the fact that the north-east is a brilliant place to live; I am sure all of us in this room agree on that. It is way more affordable than significant parts of the country. As of March, our average house price—for a very nice house—was £123,000, whereas the national average was £227,000, so I urge people to look at relocating to our area.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Not too many.

Mary Glindon: Perhaps not too many, but all are welcome.

I want to talk about what is strategically important to the north-east today, and what will make a difference to our future. For the north-east, the industrial strategy and the local industrial strategy will be about our ambition, the sectors in which we are strong, and the

infrastructure that will lead to growth, and they have to be about turning strategy into action. The LIS is seen as building on the north-east strategic plan, which was agreed with businesses and communities of all shapes and sizes. It has an ambition for more and better jobs—100,000 jobs by 2024, with at least 70% being what are termed better jobs in managerial, professional and technical roles. We have already seen more than 64,000 new jobs created, of which 77% are classed as better jobs, but we need more investment and support from the Government, so that more can be achieved, and we need the right infrastructure put in place.

Yesterday, some of us went to the drop-in held by Highways England. I was pleased to go and congratulate it on the fantastic new Silverlink interchange on the A19, which has massively improved access to the Tyne tunnels. It was done on time, through collaboration between the council, businesses, and Highways England—a great feat for the region.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I also visited the Highways England drop-in yesterday; my hon. Friend and I were there at the same time. I was told that the project to widen the A19 between Wynyard and Norton will go ahead in May. Will she join me in welcoming that, and an end to the terrible noise that the people of Billingham suffered as a result of the project?

Mary Glindon: That is fantastic news. I hope that the project is done in the same timely way as Silverlink was, and with minimum disruption.

I hope the Minister is aware that a team from the north-east has been talking to the Government about how to make real the industrial strategy's grand challenge on ageing, by working with local businesses of all sizes and with our universities. There is an opportunity to meet that challenge in our region. There is definitely a commercial opportunity and benefits for society in working with a population that is living longer. There are benefits for expertise, too. In my constituency, Procter & Gamble's research and development team is focusing on what its older customers will need to live happy and independent lives. We know about a lot of projects that would influence that.

Across our region, there is groundbreaking work in health and life sciences. I am sure colleagues here will expand on that. The north-east has real strengths in the offshore renewables sector, and our region is ready to take advantage right away of any changes in that environment. Shepherd Offshore, Smulders, WD Close and SMD are all top-class, world-renowned companies in my constituency making a difference across the sector, but they could do even more with the right investments; I will continue to go on about that in Parliament.

One of the main things that hinders the development of those industries to some degree—this is important to South Tyneside, Gateshead and Newcastle—is the need to find a way to secure a significant investment to re-route the National Grid power lines that cross over the Tyne. That would make such a difference in how the Tyne is viewed by companies from around the world. I have been pursuing the issue for a while locally, with National Grid and with another Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Minister, and I am pleased that all four local authorities, the port of Tyne and the North East LEP are working together to look at how

[*Mary Glindon*]

the power lines can be diverted to secure further contracts and local jobs for companies up and down the Tyne. I know it is a vast sum of money—around £20 million—but where there is a will, there is a way, and that is what we are working on.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making a powerful, important and positive speech about our region and its opportunities. She makes the case for the power of public investment and private sector partnership. Does she agree that it is not only large business that should invest in our region? So should small and medium-sized businesses, which are the lifeblood of our economy. For example, Sage, which is headquartered in my constituency, is working really hard to develop a strategy for a public-private partnership, so that through our public sector organisations, there is more support for growth, investment, productivity and exporting. However, it needs a clear industrial strategy to back that up.

Mary Glindon: That was an excellent intervention, which the Minister must have heard. I can only agree wholeheartedly with everything my hon. Friend said.

On digital and data, the north-east's history of engineering excellence continues in the digital age. North Tyneside was recently judged to be a hotspot for digital growth. In my constituency, and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell), our residents work in world-class digital businesses, such as Accenture and DXC Technology. There is also groundbreaking public service digital work in the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and work in local companies such as Perfect Image and Infotel UK.

The most important strength in our region is our people. We have thousands of skilled, passionate and hard-working people who drive our economy, creating and leading businesses, large and small, and working together to serve the region. Although the devolution of the adult education budget to the North of Tyne combined authority is a start, and the national careers strategy gives some important pointers, we need to ensure that we leverage the capabilities of local people.

The industrial strategy and local industrial strategy needs must be backed up with deeds. We need sector deals, which make a real difference, and clear support and investment in skills, with joined-up thinking across Government. I ask the Minister to commit to working closely with colleagues in the Department for Transport to ensure that the east coast main line upgrade is prioritised, and that our north-east transforming cities bid gets solid backing.

In both cases, there is a compelling economic case for investment. Colleagues right up the east coast of England and Scotland know that the east coast main line is as critical as investment in HS2. On the transforming cities bid, we are all working together to continue to secure investment to upgrade the metro, to reopen the Northumberland-Newcastle line to passengers, and to ensure that people and businesses can make the right connections in Sunderland, South Tyneside and Durham.

As the north-east is the only region that exports more than it imports, we will be hit hardest by Brexit. I had not mentioned Brexit up until now, but it had to come

in somewhere. For 2014 to 2020, our region received £437 million from the European structural investment funds, which will be replaced by the shared prosperity fund post Brexit. The consultation was expected last year, but we know that the Brexit timetable has changed.

The consultation has been postponed, with as yet no further date announced. Worryingly, it has been said in response to recent parliamentary questions that the final decision on the fund's design will be taken during the spending review. However, the spending review report will be published only with the Budget in the autumn. I hope that the Minister can tell us a bit more, and assure us that the consultation will begin soon. We do not want any gaps in replacing the loss of European funding.

I will be quiet now, because colleagues wish to talk about the industrial challenges in their constituencies. Those challenges are many, and influence the current and future prosperity of our region. I hope that the Minister has listened to what I have said, and will listen carefully to everything that my colleagues ask of him, and that he will give us clarity and reassurance that the Government are prepared to commit adequate support and resources to our great region, so that it can flourish for everyone in the north-east.

9.44 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) for securing this important debate and for her excellent speech. She has laid out why a proper industrial strategy is so important, especially for us in the north-east.

The north-east strategic economic plan has been active for five years. In that time, the region has seen some great change and investment, despite the uncertain times in which we find ourselves. I am proud to be the Member of Parliament for Washington and Sunderland West, which is home—as all Members know, because I bang on about it enough—to Nissan's UK car plant. There has also been exciting development around the International Advanced Manufacturing Park, known as IAMP, which I am sure Members will become equally sick of hearing me talk about.

Meanwhile, a bid to unlock a potential £33 million in funding is under way with the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing. That hub will provide advanced manufacturing solutions to many businesses across the market in the region, such as Driving the Electric Revolution, which is based in Sunderland. I am certain that that will attract innovation and investment across the region, to benefit both the local and national economy. Those developments have the potential to transform the north-east.

The north-east strategic economic plan has been successful to a certain extent. It has helped towards the creation of 100,000 more jobs by 2024, as we heard, and the economic gap between the north-east and the rest of the country has narrowed. Some 71,600 jobs have been created so far, of which 70% can be described as "better jobs". That is an excellent feat for the region and its long-term planning. However, we can be certain that the gap still exists between the north-east and the rest of the UK.

If performance, enabled by investment and infrastructure, had matched that of the rest of England except for London, we would have 93,000 more jobs in the north-east and 25,000 more businesses. The north-east still lags behind in the majority of areas of economic performance, despite, as we heard, securing more foreign investment than any other region. That suggests that the Government's economic plan is failing us. It has held back the economies and communities of Washington and Sunderland, and those of many other ex-coalfields and post-industrial northern towns.

Alex Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend agree that we have two economies in the north-east: an economy with well-paid jobs, which allows people to go on foreign holidays and enjoy their lives, and poverty that afflicts tens of thousands of people in our area? We have done extremely well as a region; if we just had more investment, we could take so many more people out of poverty.

Mrs Hodgson: Inequality and the wealth gap still exist, probably in all regions—we see it here in London too. Prosperity has never reached some parts of our region, which has led to disenfranchisement in some of our communities. We are now feeling the brunt of that in how they are voting.

Growth is good, but it is important to know where that growth comes from. The quality of communities and how they are sustained by the economy is an important part of keeping the fabric of society vibrant. The role of the Government in the economy must be more than simply growth and redistribution; they should aim to ensure that the country's growth is responsible and has a social value, so that everyone lives a better life. That is something that the Labour party is committed to, with the introduction of a Minister for manufacturing.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): The hon. Lady makes some really important points, especially on the wealth gap, which I, as a Yorkshire MP, would say is between the north—rather than the north-east—and the south. Skills and education play a key role in improving the lives and opportunities of everyone. Does she welcome the technical education offer, and the announcement of 12 new technical institutions? Two are in the north-east and Yorkshire: one, York College, is in my constituency and the other is New College Durham. Surely we have to grasp that opportunity to ensure that we improve skills and technical education in our region—I say “our region”, as a Yorkshire MP—as the north moves forward.

Mrs Hodgson: I am happy to say that I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Skills are so important. We hear from employers all the time that they often cannot find the necessary skills in the local workforce, which is heartbreaking when many young people are desperate to acquire those skills. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) mentioned, we need to ensure that prosperity is shared among everyone. The rise in the number of apprentices is also welcome, and the technical colleges that the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) mentioned play a huge and important part in that.

The Government often point to low unemployment figures as proof that their approach is working, yet in-work poverty is on the rise. It is at its highest for 20 years, with 4 million people living in poverty despite being in work—it is not just me saying that; the figure

comes from Joseph Rowntree Foundation research. One in four workers in the north of England is paid less than the real living wage, after a decade of stagnant wages and the rise of zero-hours contracts. That leads to the two-tier workforce that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North mentioned.

Although we are on our way to closing the gap and making businesses in the north-east a more valuable prospect, we are still recovering from the catastrophes that the region has faced in the last 50 years. Those catastrophes have made our communities resilient, but to ensure that we endure, one thing must be at the heart of any strategy: the environment. We must invest sustainably in our economy to ensure that future growth does not come at the expense of our environment. It is essential to confront the climate crisis in every Government strategy, especially an industrial strategy. I am proud that the Labour party has committed to do that, having already forced the Government to declare a climate emergency in May.

Nissan's investment in battery technology and electric vehicles has put Sunderland at the forefront of the European market. It is the only plant in the UK that makes a purely battery electric vehicle, the LEAF. Nissan's expansion on the back of the worldwide move to electrification offers the UK the chance to be a leader among European manufacturers, and our local communities will benefit most.

Sustainability should be at the centre of all sides of development. For example, with the expansion of IAMP, which I mentioned, I would like the local transport network to be developed to ensure that in years to come, the staff who work there will have an alternative to private motorised transport when going to work. An excellent way to do that—another opportunity that I never cease to mention—would be to expand the Tyne and Wear metro to Washington and IAMP.

Economic development is another concern in these turbulent times. The ongoing uncertainty of the Brexit process—I have mentioned it as well—may damage investment and businesses in the north-east, as 55% of Nissan's exports go to the EU. We need a solid and sensible deal for exiting the EU to give businesses certainty. Parliament has made it clear that it rejects the possibility of a no-deal Brexit, yet the idea of reintroducing a no-deal option has been used numerous times by candidates in the Conservative party's ongoing leadership campaign—I will name no names; I do not want to give anybody more publicity, not that anybody would take any notice of me—in a reckless attempt to bolster themselves. That is worryingly irresponsible and gives no assurance to UK manufacturers, some of whom described the idea of leaving the EU without a deal as “economic lunacy” this week.

The potential for a bright future in the north-east is high. Our region is growing well, and as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside said, it is a great place to live, work and have leisure time, but there are more steps to take to ensure that its development can be sustained and work for everyone, which I hope the Minister will consider.

9.54 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) on securing this important debate. Unlike her, I will refer to the past.

[Alex Cunningham]

The area that I represent has a rich history of industrial innovation, from the Stockton to Darlington railway, which was the first in the world and will celebrate its 200-year anniversary in a few years' time, and which laid the foundations of the Tees Valley's rapid growth, to our world-leading chemical and pharmaceutical industry, John Walker's invention of the friction match, and Sheraton furniture, which some of us sit on in this place. We have always been an area that leads the way, although our business and industry have changed substantially over the years and we still lament the loss of Tees shipbuilding and the thousands of well-paid jobs it once provided.

Even if we do not always receive the funding and investment we need from national Governments, the Tees Valley has demonstrated again and again that it can change and attract investment, although more could be done to help it to reach its full potential. That said, we are the third best place in the UK for business expansion and the fourth for business innovation, and we are part of the only continuous net-exporting region in the UK—north-east England.

Our Tees Valley combined authority was one of the first, and it has the powers to make the decisions that affect our area in our area. It has a plan for boosting economic growth and creating thousands of jobs. We also have a thriving and innovative industrial sector that we should celebrate and support.

We have much to be proud of, but, sadly, the decline of some industries and the failure of the Government to act mean that unemployment in our area continues to increase—it has gone up month by month in my constituency. The plight of British Steel is a case in point. I was saddened and disappointed to learn that while the Government stand on the sidelines waiting for the official receiver to try to sell the business, our elected Tees Valley Mayor has no power to intervene to protect the hundreds of jobs in steel directly and in the supply chain. I hope that the official receiver can sell the business as an integrated going concern; failure to do so will have huge ramifications for our area and others across the country in terms of jobs, and will mean that we lose a large part of a foundation industry that is crucial to the UK's manufacturing economy. Perhaps the Minister can update us on where the official receiver is up to in trying to sell the business.

The high cost of energy is a major factor in the steel crisis and for many other industries in our area. That is one reason I have been focusing on the needs of energy intensive industries not just on Teesside but across the country, from chemicals to cement production and from steel to ceramics. They also include the companies developing wind turbines and related products, which have exploited the skills of our talented engineers to produce the goods for offshore and onshore wind farms. All those industries exist in the face of the highest energy costs in Europe, but there is no plan from the Government, or anyone else, to address that or the high carbon taxes.

Our region has a huge advantage when it comes to expanding low-carbon generation through hydrogen production, in which Teesside is the bigger producer in the country; the development of energy storage; the opportunity to develop smart grids to better support

our industry and communities; and, of course, carbon capture, use and storage. I set up and chair the all-party parliamentary group on carbon capture and storage, and I was pleased to lead the demands that Teesside should be the first place to utilise its skills and knowledge in that area. CCUS has the potential to create thousands of jobs and protect thousands more. It is also important in meeting the grand clean growth challenge that the Government face and, crucially, in delivering a long-term sustainable future for the other industries based in our region.

We have heard some kindly noises from Ministers but, unfortunately, the Government have been slow to support CCUS. They talk the good talk—we have had statements, ministerial visits and news releases by the dozen—but we await the concrete commitment that will make the Teesside project roll. That is why it is vital that our local industrial strategy really counts in its support not just for CCUS but for our existing industries, and the new ones, that are critical to our future. We need a strategy that provides certainty and direction for local industries, a sound base to attract funding, and support to help the industries to grow.

A local industrial strategy would benefit our chemical and steel industries, which have been hit by Brexit, particularly the prospect of a no-deal Brexit. The chemical industry needs the EU registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—REACH—regulations, which govern the manufacture of chemicals, to apply in the UK after Brexit, but despite a considerable amount of work by Ministers and officials, the outcome remains far from perfect and we all know how nervous the industry remains. If there is no deal, what happens to the regulations such as those for chemicals? Will we be able to sell the chemicals and every other piece of manufactured kit that relies on common standards with the EU?

I mentioned earlier the collapse of British Steel, which leaves 700 direct jobs under threat on Teesside, not to mention the impact the closure would have on the local supply chain. British Steel made it clear that the likelihood of a no-deal Brexit was a major factor in its collapse. Put simply, a no-deal Brexit means no steel industry, and that would have huge negative implications on Teesside and beyond.

Surely we cannot have another repeat of the SSI fiasco, which saw an end to steel production from what was probably the country's most efficient blast furnace in Redcar. Let us not forget what the Government's failure to act has meant for people: thousands thrown out of work, many of whom are still seeking work today. Since 2015, the SSI site has seen little progress or interest from the Government.

We know that trying to put land parcels together to redevelop the area is complicated, but it is now years since the closure. Sadly, despite my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) leading Teesside's charge for investment and raising the issue of the site at every possible opportunity, we have been told the site will get £14 million—nowhere near the £200 million needed to bring the site back into proper use. What we have instead is a plethora of news releases from the Tees Valley Mayor. If we had a million pounds for every news release that has made promises and delivered nothing, we would have the £200 million that is so desperately needed on Teesside.

That said, I am pleased that the Tees Valley combined authority is currently working on a draft industrial strategy that will sit alongside its strategic economic plan. It identifies our local strengths, as well as our weaknesses, and will set a strategic direction for our industries, but our local efforts need to be backed up by the national Government—a Government that have, so far, fallen short in safeguarding our industries.

I am certain that everybody here wants to see our region prosper and thrive. I am sure we all want to reverse the increase in unemployment in our region, but it needs to be backed by more than words and news releases from the Government. I urge the Minister to stand back, look at Teesside carefully and make the right decisions as we go forward.

10.2 am

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) for introducing this debate.

Sedgefield is home to the largest business park in the north-east. Between 10,000 and 12,000 people work there, in about 500 companies, from small sole traders up to massive manufacturers, such as Gestamp, Husqvarna, 3M and, obviously, Hitachi, which is now producing the rolling stock for the east coast main line. Trains for Darlington, Durham, Newcastle and Edinburgh will enter service in August this year. Everybody is looking forward to that—we have been waiting about 40 years for it.

Another manufacturer, Roman, produces showers and bathroom furniture and is now the biggest supplier in Europe. We have a very good story to tell. We are home to a university technical college, which opened two or three years ago. It has been graded good by Ofsted and is going from strength to strength. It has a great future. It is sponsored by Gestamp and Hitachi, who want to see a throughput of apprentices, and it is bringing young people into engineering and electronics and all the manufacturing industries that we want to see maintained in Sedgefield and the north-east.

I want to talk a little about the past, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) did. We have a sound tradition of manufacturing and industry in Sedgefield. About 500 yards from Hitachi's base is Heighington crossing, where George Stephenson assembled Locomotion No. 1 so that it could enter service for the Stockton to Darlington railway back in 1825. The platform has a nice plaque about that. Next to it was the Locomotion No. 1 public house, which is now closed, but was the original ticket office and waiting room—the first ticket office and waiting room. It is there for anybody to go and see. The original platform is there as well—the oldest in the world. We can trace our manufacturing and industrial heritage back at least 200 years.

Alex Cunningham: I am surprised that my hon. Friend would claim that the first ticket office is in his constituency, because there is a plaque on a wall in my constituency that declares the first ticket office in the world to be there. Perhaps we need to meet outside of this room to consider the matter further.

Phil Wilson: We do. All I can say is that that is where the train was assembled, where the ticket office is and where the train set off from.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. I hope you will not be asking the Chair to rule on that.

Phil Wilson: No, no, but I know that Stockton had the first passenger railway in the world. We have a lot to be proud of in our area.

NETPark, a science park just outside Sedgefield village is leading the way in all kinds of technologies, including light-based technology. It produces masks that people with diabetes wear when they are asleep, which helps. It is also a catapult centre for the space industry. It is the home of technology for the future. The park overlooks the site of the old Fishburn coke works and pit, where my dad worked all those years ago. If he could only see the technologies that are now on the doorstep of where he was brought up. I am really proud of it all.

There are 9,000 manufacturing jobs in Sedgefield, which is second only to those in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), where there are 17,000 jobs and tens of thousands in the supply chain. We have a supply chain of about 16,000. Manufacturing is a key industry for the north-east of England. Make UK, the manufacturers' organisation, is now saying that it is very worried about a no-deal scenario, as it is “economic lunacy”. On this side of the House, we can all agree. Make UK's key findings are that domestic and export orders are continuing to weaken, the gap between output and orders has increased, export orders remain at their weakest since the referendum, there is growing evidence of European companies abandoning UK supply chains, investment intentions are paralysed, and the manufacturing forecast for growth is just 0.2% in 2018 and 0.8% in 2020. These are dire figures. We need to think about those indicators as we further consider in this House what to do about Brexit.

I have deep concerns about Brexit. The north-east is the only region that exports more than it imports, and more than 60% of our exports go to European markets. Being part of the EU, the single market and the customs union is vital to the north-east of England. If there is a no-deal Brexit, it is estimated that GDP will fall by 16%, which could mean the loss of something like 200,000 jobs. Those are dire figures, and we should be broadcasting them all the time.

Between 2014 and 2020, the European structural investment fund invested £437 million in the north-east economy. The aim of EU structural funds is to rebalance our economy through regional investment allocated according to need. Will the Minister tell us where that money will come from when it stops coming from the EU? The Government's stronger towns fund, launched in March this year, consists of a £1 billion fund allocated to English regions and £600 million available under competitive bidding after Brexit. That is less than 10% of what UK regions would receive if the UK remained in the EU; the north-east alone was projected to receive £1 billion over seven years. The shared prosperity fund, which was designed to reduce inequalities between communities, has released no details on the level of funding, the funding model, the length of funding periods or the fund's administration.

Another issue that I want to raise with the Minister, which he might not be responsible for, is the high street fund, which was announced by the Chancellor of the

[Phil Wilson]

Exchequer a few months ago. We all agree that we need to see improvements to our high streets. Newton Aycliffe in my constituency has a high street that is owned by Freshwater. The environmental area has been vastly improved—something for which the town has won awards—but there is still the problem of empty units and shops closing, which affects not just Newton Aycliffe, but our high streets up and down the country. If the likes of Darlington and Durham are losing their branches of Marks & Spencer, I really worry about the future of high streets in new towns such as Newton Aycliffe. What can we do to remedy that?

I want to make one or two other points. The north-east is one region, but we do not act like one region. If we did, we would become a true powerhouse. The regional development agency, which was abolished by this Government back in 2010-11, was a key asset to the north-east of England. I think it is fair to say that investment was from the public sector to the private sector in the north; in the south-east, it might be from the private sector to the private sector. The regional development agency was therefore a key contributor to bringing investment to the north-east.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is making a very good point, which I want to reinforce by putting it on record that, from my recollection, the regional development agency in the north-east was the only one that really worked as it should have. For every £1 that the Government invested in the north-east through the One North East RDA, the return was £7. I might have it wrong, but that is the figure from memory. Does he agree that we should have certainly been able to keep One North East, because it worked?

Phil Wilson: That is right, and to abolish One North East was an act of economic vandalism. It was a kind of ideology gone mad—"If it is public sector, we should abolish it." We now see the impact of its loss, to the detriment of the north-east of England. We have got rid of the regional development agency, and we do not act as one region. We have two Mayors and three combined authorities competing with each other, whereas we need to be one region—the north-east of England—talking as one for the benefit of the whole region.

I will finish by discussing the issue of Brexit. I remember when the news came out a few months ago about the manufacturing loss of Nissan models such as the X-Trail. I remember people from the region saying on the television, "Well, if Nissan goes, we'll be okay. We survived the closure of the pits. We survived the closure of the shipyards." Well, we might have done—we might be starting to come out of that period—but it has taken years. How did we survive that? Why have we got a big upturn in car manufacturing? How have we as a region been able to attract foreign direct investment in the way that we have, with Nissan and Hitachi in my constituency, and with other manufacturers around the country? How were we able to survive the closures of the pits and the shipyards? The reason is that we were in the single market and the customs union, and we had access to the biggest trading bloc—the biggest economic bloc—in the world. My view is that it is absolutely wrong for the region, and for this country, to close the door on that.

We were able to come round from the closure of the pits. I grew up in a pit village, and I know what happened back in the 1980s. We managed to get through the catastrophe of the closure of the shipyards because we were in the single market and the customs union. If we close the door, what will it do for the future of manufacturing and the economic wellbeing of my region and the country? Should there be a no-deal Brexit, GDP will fall by 16%, which is not in the best interest of the people of the north-east of England. We need to be saying that loud and clear from this day on, until we get a resolution to the issue of Brexit. In my view, there is no deal that is better than the one we have now. I have asked the Prime Minister whether the deal she brought forward is better than the one we have now, but I have yet to receive an answer.

10.14 am

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) for securing this important debate. It is really apposite that we are having this debate now, as later this month the North East LEP will publish its evidence base, which will contribute to developing our north-east industrial strategy.

As hon. Members have said, we have some difficulties in the north-east. Like others, I am hugely proud of our communities, businesses and places in the north-east. They have real strength, real history and real power, and I want to see us build on that. We need to recognise the issues we face, if we are to have any chance of addressing those difficulties. In my constituency, we have both industrial and retail sites, which I will come to later. We have the Metrocentre, which is still the largest indoor shopping centre in the UK. We also have the long-established Team Valley trading estate, which houses over 700 businesses. Not all of it is in my constituency of Blaydon—some of it is in the Gateshead constituency—but a significant part is. It is really important that we keep our links with the people trading on the estate; they are an important part of our local economy.

As I have said, we need to recognise the issues that we face, if we are to address them. We need to ensure that the north-east can grow and develop its economy, creating more and better jobs. Sadly, unemployment in the region is still 5.4%, compared with 3.8% across the UK, and many of the jobs that have been created are part time and low paid and do not represent the best jobs that we could have for our communities. That is where the industrial strategy is important. It must reflect our current strengths and also grow new sectors. We have heard about the digital sector, and there is also a growing video game sector in Gateshead that we need to develop. Any industrial strategy must consider those new sectors and present new opportunities.

I want to touch on a few of the things that should go into the strategy. The first is infrastructure, which hon. Members have mentioned. Connectivity is a real issue in the north, especially in the north-east. It needs to be addressed if we are to have a positive industrial future. We know that Transport for the North, which covers the whole of the north rather than just the north-east, has submitted a request for industrial funding under the "Rail for the north" strategy. That is a £39 billion development proposal. Many of us in the north-east want to see much more of that rail development in

the region, and we will continue to argue for that. We certainly must address that infrastructure issue, and the others that hon. Members have mentioned, if we are to have a positive future industrial strategy.

The issue of European funding was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) and others. As we have heard, the north-east is the only region that is a net exporter. We have heard that it will be hit hard by Brexit, especially a no-deal Brexit—there would be an estimated 16% fall in GDP growth. It is important to ensure that we have the right conditions and the right deal for the north-east if we are to avoid real problems.

Hon. Members have already referred to the shared prosperity fund. The north-east currently benefits from EU structural investment funds that are designed to address regional imbalances, receiving £437 million between 2014 and 2020. It is vital that businesses know the size and the terms of the shared prosperity fund as soon as possible. It has been kicked down the road in the years since the initial announcement was made. It is absolutely vital that our businesses know what is coming so they can plan accordingly.

Let me touch on education and skills. As we have heard, the north-east has some excellent universities and further education colleges, including Gateshead College—the outstanding and high-performing college—yet employers still struggle to find workers with the right skills, so we need action to close the skills gap and identify our future skills needs. We must address that in the strategy, and local input—the local power to have a say on skills—is really important when we do that.

The retail sector provides nearly a quarter of the jobs in my constituency. We know that the retail sector, high streets and shopping malls are going through a tough time, so we need a retail strategy. That is one of the weaknesses of the Government's national industrial strategy. We need a greater emphasis on retail, because it is such a significant part of our economy. We need a proper strategy to deal with the problems on the high street. The Government need look no further than the excellent report on the future of the high street that the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee produced earlier this year. We must also address the wider problems in retail and issues relating to pay, skills and retail sector workers' personal development and training, so that they are able to develop, enhance their skills, improve the services they provide and add value to the sector.

Alex Cunningham: I congratulate the Select Committee on its excellent report. It visited my constituency to see Stockton high street. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the local authority, which is bringing international athletics to the area? International athletes will be running down the widest high street in England, bringing people into our town centre and boosting our local businesses.

Liz Twist: I am very happy to congratulate Stockton on those innovations—while of course mentioning that Gateshead, which is not to be outdone, has a strong record in international athletics.

The north-east has a rich and proud industrial history, but we need support. Positive steps must be taken to put in place infrastructure. We must recognise and address the particular issues that we face in the north-east.

10.22 am

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a real pleasure and honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon), on securing this important and timely debate. The industrial strategy in the north-east does not receive the attention it deserves, so I am grateful to her for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall and for making such a passionate and comprehensive opening speech. She combined in-depth knowledge of her constituency and region with real lived experience. In that, she was joined by my hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), who all grew up and have lived in the region, and spoke with such knowledge. It is a pity that that knowledge is not reflected by the presence of Government Members from north-east constituencies, but Labour Members have done well and have spoken with in-depth knowledge about our region.

Like other hon. Members, I will talk a little about the past. We are very proud of our industrial heritage. I grew up in Newcastle in the shadow of industrial greats such as Armstrong, Stephenson and Parsons—that, by the way, is Rachel Parsons, the world's first female naval engineer, who inspired me to become an engineer. I always like to remind colleagues from across the UK that the north-east literally drove the first industrial revolution. There might be some debate about where the first ticket office was—you were wise not to rule on that, Mr Betts, but perhaps we can have a parliamentary inquiry on that important subject—but there is no debate about who invented the railways. George Stephenson built the locomotive in my constituency, and our region mined and built many of the industrial riches that flowed from the first industrial revolution.

Today, as we have heard, manufacturing makes up approximately 15% of the north-east economy, and we have more than 63,000 specialist workers in our successful advanced manufacturing sector. We have a 126,000-strong workforce in wider manufacturing, and an average of 51,000 science, technology, engineering and mathematics students come through our universities every year. We are in the top five UK regions for advanced manufacturing. We have world-class universities and growing strengths in science, digital, energy, healthcare and business.

Years of deindustrialisation, and chronic underinvestment in infrastructure and education, have left the north-east with significant economic challenges. No one who lived in the region in the 1980s can forget what forced deindustrialisation did to our region, the economic livelihoods that were lost and the talent and potential that was lost with them. The financialisation of our economy that followed centred on London and the south and meant that thousands of manufacturing jobs in the north-east were lost. As leading economist Mariana Mazzucato has argued, the “two faces” of financialisation are at the heart of capitalism's fundamental failure. The first is that the financial sector has stopped resourcing the real economy. Instead of investing in companies that produce stuff, finance is financing finance. The second is how financialisation changes the motors behind economic activity, giving investors with short-term interests more control over firms. That disproportionately affects

[*Chi Onwurah*]

the north-east—a region that still takes pride in making and building things. Its legacy is low productivity and low pay.

As we heard from many of my hon. Friends, Brexit adds more uncertainty. The north-east exports more than it imports, as my hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield, for Washington and Sunderland West, and for Blaydon highlighted, and more than half of that goes to the European Union. No matter what deal there is, there will be negative economic consequences for our region. A no-deal Brexit would be absolutely catastrophic. I ask the Minister to rule that out personally.

As my hon. Friends emphasised, the north-east received almost £0.5 billion in European structural investment funding in the period 2014 to 2020. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield said, projections for the next seven years suggest that we would have received up to £1 billion in EU funding, but the Government's paltry stronger towns fund repackages existing money to the tune of £1 billion for all UK regions. As my hon. Friends said, we have no details about the supposed shared prosperity fund. Labour has committed to matching European Union regional development funding for at least the next decade, so will the Minister take this opportunity to commit to tackling regional inequality by guaranteeing the continuation of the current and projected future levels of regional funding?

At the heart of tackling the challenges that our great region faces needs to be a strong, positive industrial strategy capable of building and rebuilding the economy to meet the needs of the future. Until very recently, the Government were incapable of saying “industrial” and “strategy” in the same sentence, so their acknowledgment of the need for local industrial strategies is a step forward. Unfortunately, we have no evidence that the Government's industrial strategy is anywhere near sufficient for the north-east's needs. Their industrial strategy is sectoral, favours sectors that are already well organised and can push to the front of the queue, and focuses on what I, as an engineer, would call “sexy science”. Last year, Sheffield Hallam University researchers found that the Government's industrial strategy pledges would impact only 10% of our manufacturing base and only 1% of the whole economy.

The north-east's five universities make a huge contribution to our economy—they contribute £750 million directly, and £1 billion more through other industries—yet the golden triangle of London-Cambridge-Oxford attracts the lion's share of research funding—more than £17 billion, compared with only £600 million for the north-east—despite the north-east's many research-intensive universities, such as Newcastle University. Cambridge, with a population of just over a quarter of a million, has as many private research and development jobs as the whole of the north. Does the Minister agree that innovation should deliver high-skilled jobs across our country, and how will he ensure that local industrial strategies from our local enterprise partnerships and the North of Tyne Mayor have the resources that they need to deliver high-skilled and high-productivity jobs?

Labour's “innovation nation” mission would raise R&D to 3% of GDP, and would democratise science and technology, so that they benefit the whole country, as well as the whole region. It would also be certain to

benefit the north-east's growing tech industry. We need to maintain our current centres of excellence, but we must ensure that every region can benefit from innovation and growth. That is why we are committed to putting technology and innovation at the heart of the lowest-paid and least productive sectors. My hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon, and for Stockton North, mentioned the importance of retail. We are committed to creating a retail catapult, which will support the 3 million people who work in retail across the UK, making it the UK's largest private sector employer.

Much of our additional R&D spend would be drawn on by our industrial strategy missions, such as investing in carbon capture and storage, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North also mentioned, as part of our commitment to decarbonise our economy by 2050 and to deliver hundreds of thousands of green jobs in the process. The Government's refusal to commit to funding a carbon capture and storage facility on Teesside is another example of their unwillingness to invest in the green technologies of the future.

The regional disparity and unique issues that the north-east faces are the reason that we need the £250 billion national investment bank—a network of regional development banks—to which Labour is committed. That would properly put regional needs first and restore regional decision making. Labour's national education service will address some of the challenges highlighted by my hon. Friends, by delivering education, free at the point of demand, from cradle to grave, and ensuring that we have the skills that our regional businesses need.

As my hon. Friends also highlighted, improving infrastructure is critical to raising productivity. Under the Tories, infrastructure spending in the north-east is five times lower than in London, which is why Labour's £250 billion national transformation fund would invest in our transport and digital infrastructure. We have already committed to a £1.4 billion investment in north-east transport, which would renew rolling stock on the Metro and build a Crossrail for the north. Would the Minister like to do the same?

Labour would also establish a new materials and metals catapult centre on Teesside—that is supported by UK Steel, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Confederation of British Industry—to help secure the future of UK steel by encouraging innovation in the materials industry. Will the Minister secure the future of UK steel with a commitment to support it?

As we have heard, the north-east is a fantastic region that offers a quality of life that is second to none, with sun, surf, castles, coasts, rolling landscapes, history—including the Romans—excellent local produce and excellent industry. We need a real industrial strategy to support the north-east, realise its potential and deliver an economy that ensures prosperity for everyone across our region. Labour's industrial strategy is positive, practical and visionary enough to know the future that we want, while focusing on addressing our present challenges in productivity, skills and wages. Will the Minister commit to doing the same?

10.35 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Tyneside

(Mary Glendon) on securing the debate. I thank hon. Members, who have given very considered and generally good-natured speeches.

I will now start to get controversial. My father was born in Shildon, County Durham, which is of course the home of the railways, and I still have family living in Wylam, Northumberland, which is the birthplace of George Stephenson, the father of the railways. He did much of his pioneering work in Killingworth, in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Tyneside. I am delighted that his work was mentioned by the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), but I will not pass judgment on where the first ticket office was. Sadly, even though I am Andrew George Stephenson and my family descend from that part of the world, I cannot claim to be a descendant of the great man, because George Stephenson had only one son, Robert, who had no children. If we look far back enough, though, who knows?

My father's first job in the north-east was for British Rail in Shildon, before he moved permanently to Manchester, where he worked in the aerospace sector for Avro, the famed manufacturer of the Lancaster and Vulcan bombers. I know that the pride my family felt at working in vital industries across the north-east of England is still deeply felt by people in the region today.

Our industrial strategy is about ensuring that that heritage of excellence is translated into future success and prosperity. We want to grow productivity and prosperity across all parts of the country, so that whenever young people decide to leave a place such as Shildon for opportunities elsewhere in the country, they do it through choice and not because they feel forced out by a lack of chances closer to home.

As we have heard, the north-east has a proud tradition of innovation, creativity and technical skills. We know that from the histories of railways, mining, shipbuilding and electronics, as well as from today's leading businesses in the region, such as the cutting-edge offshore energy companies that have moved into the region's old shipbuilding areas and one of the world's most productive automotive clusters, based around Nissan. The industrial strategy is about taking that existing strength and blending it with the future-facing technologies and skills that emerge from our knowledge-intensive centres, such as those at Newcastle's £350 million Helix site, Sunderland's Software City or Durham's NETPark.

The industrial strategy focuses on strengthening the foundations of productivity: skilled people, thriving places, ideas, innovation and support for the business environment. The industrial strategy is also about taking on the grand challenges of clean growth, the future of mobility, our ageing society, and artificial intelligence and data. Those are society-changing opportunities and industries of the future in which the UK can build on its strengths and truly lead the world.

Since the publication of the industrial strategy, we have made significant progress across the country. We have committed to the biggest ever increase in R&D, an extra £7 billion by 2021-22, which includes the £1.7 billion that we have already allocated to innovative programmes to support industries and researchers through the first two waves of the industrial strategy challenge fund.

The first wave of the strength in places fund, which supports industrial strategy with a place-based approach to research and innovation, has awarded seedcorn support

to two north-east projects to enable them to develop full bids this year: the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing, led by the University of Sunderland; and the north-east cluster for healthy ageing and independent living, led by Newcastle University. In the neighbouring Tees Valley, strength in places support has been awarded to a project to establish the UK hydrogen corridor, which aims to reduce carbon usage dramatically by producing, using and storing hydrogen energy.

Alex Cunningham: Any investment in the north-east is great news, in particular if it encourages innovation, but does the Minister also recognise that we need to support our existing industries? British Steel is a particularly important one at this time. As I asked in my remarks, will he update us on his understanding of the progress being made in that area?

Andrew Stephenson: Certainly. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of British Steel. Since I was appointed, it has probably been the one thing that has taken up more of my time than anything else. The one point of contention in what he said was his suggestion that the Government were standing on the sidelines as British Steel went into liquidation, waiting for the receiver to act.

The hon. Gentleman was in the main Chamber when I answered an urgent question by saying that no stone was being left unturned. At that point, I think that the Department was up to 87 meetings about British Steel. The £120 million bridging loan that we extended to the company earlier in the year showed the Secretary of State's willingness to think innovatively and to act with regard to British Steel. We considered all sorts of proposals made by the company but, unfortunately, none of them proved compliant with state aid rules—we took legal opinion on that—so the company went into liquidation.

The Government acted immediately by providing the liquidator with an indemnity for the cost of keeping the site running, so that the blast furnaces could be kept running and we would end up with British Steel in the best possible situation to be sold as a going concern. The very next day after the Secretary of State made his statement to the House about the unfortunate news of the liquidation, he and I went up to Scunthorpe to meet trade union representatives and other people on the site to discuss how to work together to ensure that it could be sold as a going concern. I remain hopeful that that will be the case, and I will continue to leave no stone unturned, working with the trade unions, the workers and others on site to ensure that it is sold as a going concern.

Alex Cunningham: I might have been a little unkind to the Minister—that is a hell of a lot of meetings—but talking does not get us far when real funding is needed. If this integrated part of the steel industry cannot be sold as a going concern, just as we nationalised the banks, will the Minister consider nationalising part of the steel industry, even on a temporary basis, to ensure that we do not lose this critical foundation industry?

Andrew Stephenson: I think that I am correct in saying that the Secretary of State has not ruled that option out. However, the thing to bear in mind about nationalisation is that, even if British Steel were nationalised, the same state aid rules apply: the company has to be

[Andrew Stephenson]

run on a commercial basis in order to be compliant with those rules. Therefore, nationalisation is not a simple solution; it might be the solution, but it is not an easy option.

Lots of steel companies in the UK and across Europe are doing great work, and I hope that we can find an experienced company in the sector that wants to invest in British Steel. If we look at the steel sector pipeline—orders and infrastructure projects across the UK, such as Hinkley Point, High Speed 2 and various other big projects—there is sizeable domestic demand for products made by British Steel. I think that the company has a strong future. I am therefore very hopeful that over the coming weeks and months we will find a good buyer who will want to invest in the site and, most importantly, its workers who have such skills and knowledge of the industry, to ensure the future of steelmaking in that part of this country.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for responding to questions about the key strategic asset of British Steel and of that capability. He cited state aid rules as a crucial concern in providing the right level of financial and other support. Does he agree that different countries interpret state aid rules in different ways? Other countries within the European Union have been, shall we say, far more innovative, creative and supportive with their strategic industrial capacities, despite the same state aid rules environment. Will he commit to publishing parts of the legal advice on the possible infringement of state aid, so that we can see whether there is a way to provide British Steel with the support it requires within the European Union and, indeed, World Trade Organisation state aid rules, which other countries do manage to achieve?

Andrew Stephenson: The shadow Minister makes a valid point about the interpretation of state aid rules. The challenge of the rules in relation to the steel sector is that they are particularly rigid. A lot of the global overcapacity was created by illegal subsidies around the world for domestic steel producers.

We received legal advice from within the Department and, on the Secretary of State's instruction, we sought a second opinion, because we wanted to ensure that there was definitely nothing more that we could do. The accounting officer's advice has, I believe, been laid in the Libraries of both Houses, so it is available to all hon. Members who wish to see it. I hope that it sets out how the Government looked at the issue in a detailed way.

The reason I mentioned the 87 meetings is that we were meeting morning, evening and night about it, in order to find a way through. The Secretary of State, whom I have the pleasure of working with and serving under, has a real commitment to the north-east. Originally, he is from that part of the world, and he really wants the British Steel site to remain a going concern. Through the number of meetings he has had, the £120 million bridging facility provided to the industry and other things, he clearly demonstrates a commitment to finding a way through, but it has to be legal and compliant with both UK domestic law and EU law. I look forward to continuing to work with him, hon. Members in all parts of the House, trade unions and others to ensure a future for British Steel.

Returning to research and development spending, we have committed record investment in UK infrastructure: £37 billion has been committed through the national productivity investment fund, including £2.5 billion for the transforming cities fund to improve transport, £5.5 billion for the housing infrastructure fund and £740 million for digital infrastructure. That infrastructure investment has been of direct relevance to the north-east of England. In March, the Government announced that £10 million from the first tranche of the transforming cities fund will be allocated to the north-east, and £35.9 million of housing infrastructure funding has been allocated to the region.

Aside from that national work, all places will produce local industrial strategies, setting out how the quest for prosperity will come to life in our cities, towns and rural areas. The first local industrial strategy was published on 16 May in the west midlands. I was delighted to join local councillors and others in Coventry to launch that strategy. The north-east and the Tees Valley areas are both in the second wave of places to produce their own local industrial strategies in collaboration with Government. In the area of the hon. Member for North Tyneside, that work is led by the North East local enterprise partnership, which has a strong history of evidence-based delivery and is well placed to develop a powerful and distinctive local industrial strategy for the region. So far, a number of critical local drivers have been identified to improve productivity in the north-east: from the need to grow small businesses and to improve start-up rates, to improving the skills base of the local workforce.

The north-east boasts a cutting-edge technological and knowledge economy, based on its four leading universities and its fast-growing digital and tech sectors. On the doorstep are tremendous opportunities in east coast offshore energy, as well as deep expertise in advanced manufacturing. I am particularly interested in the contribution that the area could make to the ageing society grand challenge, which was cited by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). The north-east is home to the £40 million National Innovation Centre for Ageing, which reflects Newcastle University's longstanding leadership in that field. There is a powerful story to tell about how the north-east, with its large rural area and expertise of the transition away from heavy industry, is ideally placed to lead the response to this national and global challenge.

The north-east local industrial strategy will be empowered by the recent North of Tyne devolution deal, which covers three north-east authorities: Newcastle, Northumberland and the home authority of the hon. Member for North Tyneside. I congratulate the three councils on their successful pursuit of devolution, and Jamie Driscoll on his recent election as the first North of Tyne Mayor. The Government have a strong track record of working with the elected mayors, including Ben Houchen in Tees Valley. Alongside specific powers such as control over the adult education budget, the deal includes a total investment fund of £600 million over 30 years, to be used by the area to pursue its local growth goals. Local estimates are that the investment will generate £1.1 billion for the local economy and create 10,000 new jobs.

The north-east local industrial strategy will build on a strong track record of investment in the wider North East local enterprise partnership area. Over the three rounds of the local growth fund, £379.6 million will be invested

in the North East LEP area. That includes £1 million for the Ignite centre for engineering and innovation in North Tyneside. I look forward to visiting the north-east and Tees Valley—shortly I will visit the Centre for Process Innovation, which has bases in both areas. That centre has a strong record of collaboration with Government, including a £38 million grant from UK Research and Innovation to establish a national biologics industry innovation centre in Darlington.

Alex Cunningham: I am sure we will welcome the Minister when he comes to the Tees Valley. Will he bring some good news on carbon capture, use and storage?

Andrew Stephenson: I am very keen to see the UK move forward with carbon capture, use and storage. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the report by the Committee on Climate Change, which suggested that we could move towards a target of net zero in the same cost envelope as our current target. It says that carbon capture and storage has to be part of the mix. That will accelerate what the Government are doing in this area. I will certainly pass on remarks from today's debate to the Minister for Energy and Climate Change, as I am sure she will want to focus on this area. When I am in the region, I will be keen to see some of the work in the renewables sector, and I will also pay close attention to carbon capture, use and storage now that the hon. Gentleman has raised it.

I will visit the CPI's Redcar centre to discuss its achievements and ambitions and the development of the industrial strategy. I look forward to attending the northern powerhouse SME roadshow in June, to discuss investment opportunities and links to the industrial strategy across the whole of the north. Through local partnerships with Government and the impact of national investments, we expect the north-east and Tees Valley to play a full part in the industrial strategy agenda.

I was pleased to hear a number of hon. Members support various Highways England projects in the region, including Silverlink and improvements to the A19. I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for North Tyneside about power lines; she has raised that point on numerous occasions and has met my ministerial colleague about this issue, who wrote to Ofgem about it, and we are looking at possible ways forward. I am sure we will continue to push the point, and I assure her that her remarks today have not gone unnoticed.

Members rightly raised the importance of the east coast main line. At the Cabinet meeting in Newcastle in July 2018, a £780 million investment in the east coast main line was announced, which hopefully will mean faster journey times and more frequent services. That builds on the £337 million that was announced to upgrade local transport through a new fleet on the Tyne and Wear metro.

I strongly agree with the comments by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West about the importance of Nissan and its huge strength in battery technology. I agree that the company is incredibly well placed to benefit from schemes such as the Government's £246 million Faraday battery challenge, which is supporting the development of new battery technology in a market that will be worth £5 billion to the UK by 2025.

As the Minister responsible for the automotive sector, I recognise that the sector will go through more change in the next 10 years than it has in the last 100. We need

to work closely with car manufacturers based in the UK to help them with that transition and to ensure that they decide this is the best country in the world in which to invest in new, cleaner modes of transport.

Chi Onwurah: The Minister speaks about the importance of battery technology, and Nissan's strength in particular, but does he recognise that while the five-year fund supports investment in battery technology, it does not support investment in battery manufacturing? In this country we need a battery manufacturing base, so that batteries are not simply imported. Will he speak to that? I also hope he will not forget to respond to the concerns about a replacement for European regional development and structural investment funds.

Andrew Stephenson: The shadow Minister is correct; that is one of the reasons why we have the industrial strategy challenge fund. I mentioned my being in Coventry to launch the west midlands local industrial strategy, which was the first to be launched. On that day, I was delighted to visit the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre and to announce a further £28 million for that facility, which will be about production. It will take technologies being developed in places such as the Advanced Propulsion Centre and see how to produce batteries here in the UK. Some existing companies that have already done incredible work, such as Nissan, have the potential to bid for some of the Government funds that are already available, as well as future funds. That is fundamental because of the number of petrol engines we produce in the UK: to keep the UK as an automotive hub, we need to ensure that companies across the board invest in battery technology and production in the UK.

Questions have been asked about the £675 million high streets fund, the £1.6 billion stronger towns fund and the UK shared prosperity fund. More details of all those funds will be published in due course. They show the Government's commitment to addressing the challenges raised by Members today. We need to invest more in renewable technologies, as was raised by several Members. The offshore wind sector deal is a great example of that. The Government's commitment to the sector is underlined by the £92 billion of public and private investment in renewables since 2010. We have just finished an 18-day coal-free run in our power supply.

Lots has been done, but there is lots more to do, and lots of great ideas have been suggested today. I look forward to working with all Members who spoke in the debate and to visiting their constituencies and some of the projects they talked about.

10.58 am

Mary Glendon: I neglected to congratulate the Minister on his appointment. We are all pleased to hear that he has roots in the north-east and a personal knowledge of it, and we will call on that—he has dropped himself right in it.

I hope that the issues about British steel, which have been stressed over and over again, will be carried forward because they are so important. Will the Minister take on board and pass on the message that a no-deal Brexit is no good for the north-east in any shape or form? It would be catastrophic.

Members in the debate have shown the pride of the north-east today. We want an industrial strategy that works for everyone—as the Minister said, to get prosperity

[Mary Glendon]

in every region so nobody misses out and everyone can flourish in the north-east through a good industrial strategy. We will push the Minister as we move towards the publication of our industrial strategy. Thanks again to everyone who has participated in this debate and to you, Mr Betts.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered industrial strategy in the North East of England.

Transport: Cheshire

10.59 am

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport in Cheshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am glad to see you here, and I thank the other hon. Members present for attending.

The debate is about transport issues in Cheshire, but we could not possibly deal with all the issues in the time available, so I will talk about two issues with a common element that has been causing much anger, frustration and consternation in my constituency and beyond. I refer to the River Mersey and the tolls my constituents face to cross it, be it by the Mersey tunnels or the Mersey Gateway. There is now no way they can cross the river for work, for family reasons or for medical treatment without paying a fee. Of course, there have always been fees for the Mersey tunnels, but not ones that discriminate against people because of where they live.

Let me start with the principle of the tolls. The fact that the Mersey tunnels have always had tolls does not make the tolls' existence any more defensible. Indeed, it is difficult to understand why they are still in place, given that we have heard repeatedly from Ministers how the removal of tolls can improve an area's economic performance—an argument that seemingly won in south Wales, where the Severn crossings had their tolls abolished; in Scotland, where the new Forth crossing is not tolled; and in the true blue Tory shires of England, where plans for the A14 upgrade to be tolled around Huntingdon and Cambridge were scrapped.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Would there not be a considerable outcry if just one of the 36 bridges over the River Thames in London were tolled? Is this unfairness not a case of a real north-south divide?

Justin Madders: I agree, and London seems to do better than the rest of the country in terms of per-head transport investment, too.

None of the crossings in Northern Ireland is tolled, none in Scotland is tolled and, as we have heard, London is equally blessed. In fact, more than 90% of tidal crossings in this country are toll free. The argument that tolls harm economic growth seems to be accepted everywhere, except on the River Mersey.

As I said, the tolls on the Mersey tunnels have always been with us. They are not popular, but they have always been part of life. However, an unconscionable decision earlier this year by the Liverpool city region metro Mayor has made them far less acceptable. Regular tunnel users can apply for a fast tag, which gives a discount on the normal fees. From 1 April this year, the fee for those who live in the Merseyside area was reduced from £1.20 to £1, but the fee for those outside the Merseyside area was increased by a whopping 50%, from £1.20 to £1.80. That decision was made with little notice, no consultation and complete disregard for the economic impact on those living outside Merseyside.

Although my constituency is in Cheshire, we are very much in the hinterland of Merseyside—the number of Liverpool shirts I saw over the weekend is testament to that. We are less than 10 miles from Liverpool city centre, and our economic, cultural and family connections

mean that people travel there daily. When my constituents ask me whether it is right that they have to pay nearly twice as much as someone who lives just down the road from them to go to work or visit their elderly mother, I tell them, “No, it isn’t.” It is discrimination by postcode, and it is not something I believe anyone who wants fairness in this country can support.

To be fair to the metro Mayor, he would like to be able to get rid of tolls altogether. I am happy to work with him and anyone else who wants to join me on that campaign, but that is a longer-term aim. In the short term, he has defended his decision robustly. He rightly points out that the Liverpool city region has experienced the largest Government funding cuts anywhere in the country, and that the people he represents cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of austerity. His conclusion is that he cannot have non-city region residents’ travel being subsidised. I understand what he says, but he is simply wrong about subsidy.

The Mersey tunnels, for which I understand the tolls are the third highest of their type in the whole country, are operated under the Mersey Tunnels Act 2004, which permits any operating surplus to be used by the transport authority to achieve public transport policies in its local transport plan. In 2017-18, the surplus from operating the tunnels was £16.7 million, so my constituents, far from asking for a subsidy, clearly subsidise the rest of the Merseytravel operation—indeed, all tunnel users do. Given that level of surplus, the decision to increase the costs for my constituents by 50% cannot be said to be critical to Merseytravel’s operations. There is no room for doubt about that. It feels much more like racketeering.

One might argue that the surplus is used to provide good public transport services across Merseyside and beyond, which of course benefits my constituents, albeit to a lesser degree than Merseyside residents. However, a closer look at rail fares suggests that when my constituents use cross-border Merseyrail services, they are again subject to indefensible price differences. For example, a day return from Eastham Rake on the Merseyrail line—the first stop in Merseyside when travelling from Cheshire—to Liverpool is £1.50 cheaper than a day return from Little Sutton. That is 25% extra for just two stops down the line. Although Capenhurst station is not in my constituency, it is used by many of my constituents and it is also just two stops down from Eastham Rake, but a day return to Liverpool from Capenhurst costs more than £3 extra.

It feels like the residents of Cheshire are seen as a soft touch—a cash cow. Sadly, I feel there is a bit of reverse snobbery here, the implication being that people who live in Cheshire are a bit better off, so they can afford to pay more. That just is not the case for the majority of people. My constituency has some pockets of wealth, but it also has some of the most deprived wards in the country. Some of the examples constituents have given me of the hardship they have suffered demonstrate that they are not people with loads of spare cash floating about, waiting to be squeezed until the pips squeak.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Although he feels his constituents are discriminated against, does he accept that the same applies to people from Knowsley, parts of Liverpool and St Helens, for whom there is no public transport option that makes sense? They have only one

option: the Mersey Gateway. In some cases, it costs them £20 a week extra to travel to and from work in his constituency or that of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury). Surely that is not acceptable.

Justin Madders: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will talk about the Mersey Gateway later, because we have another very difficult situation there.

As my right hon. Friend says, many people have no option but to cross the Mersey to get to work. Many of those people work in public sector organisations such as the police and the NHS, and have not had a real pay rise for almost a decade. They often work shifts. The only way they can get to work is with their own transport, because public transport does not operate on the routes or at the times they need to get to work.

For example, an Ellesmere Port resident works as a physiotherapist specialising in treating head and neck cancer patients from across the north-west at Aintree Hospital. She pays at least £400 more per year than Wirral residents to get to work. What about the band 5 staff nurse who recently began working at the Royal Liverpool Hospital and, due to her shift times, has to drive from Ellesmere Port to Liverpool? She says she finds it financially crippling to pay tunnel tolls and car park fees. She also makes the point that colleagues who live down the road from her on the Wirral and in Liverpool can pay the lower toll, but they have better public transport options anyway.

We know how hard it is for the NHS to recruit and retain staff, particularly nurses, but this policy seems to be forcing them out. One nurse told me that

“the individual cost of the Toll fees on my current wage may force me to leave my nursing post at the Royal Liverpool NHS Foundation trust and seek employment elsewhere. I find my situation ironic due the desperate need for nursing staff at the hospital but am being forced out by unfair and discriminatory postcode politics.”

I could not have put it better myself. Then there are the people who have to travel across the Mersey at both crossings to get treatment at more specialist healthcare services, such as Broadgreen and Alder Hey. Why should people with the most serious conditions be treated in that way?

I have been given dozens of examples of people who use the tunnels for work and who are thinking of taking their talents elsewhere. Ultimately, this is an economically damaging policy. There are also those who go to visit their family, including elderly relatives. I have a constituent who travels over the Mersey nearly every day to care for her 80-year-old mum, who has dementia. She saves the council a fortune in social care costs, but her contribution does not appear to carry any weight. There are others, including the British Sign Language interpreter, the paramedics, the teachers and the Leahurst veterinary school students. None of those people have been considered, because there has been no assessment of the impact of the decision.

Those are just some examples of the hardship faced by my constituents and others who have no choice but to cross the Mersey—hardship the metro Mayor actually appears to recognise. Last year, he said:

“The introduction of additional tolls has proven to be a significant imposition to many from lower socio-economic groups, who are already struggling to make ends meet.”

[Justin Madders]

He was talking about the Mersey Gateway tolls, but it could just as easily have been the Mersey tunnels tolls. I agree, and his argument applies to both crossings. I also agree with him when he said:

“The economic wellbeing of our city region is a joint responsibility between the combined authority and Government.”

I ask the Minister to set out what he will do to ensure that my constituents no longer face these rip-off charges.

If the Minister does not think it is the Government's responsibility to ensure citizens of this country do not face postcode discrimination, he must agree that they do have responsibility for promises made by members of the Government. I refer specifically to the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, who made promises about the Mersey Gateway that have not materialised. In a tweet on 23 April 2015 he said:

“Confirm we'll extend free bridge tolls to residents of Cheshire W & Chester + Warrington”.

One of my constituents was understandably a little sceptical about that comment, so he emailed the Conservative party candidate for Ellesmere Port and Neston in the 2015 election, who responded in unequivocal terms:

“If we get a majority it's a firm commitment and applies to all of Cheshire West Council including us. I've been involved in making the case to the Chancellor and he's listened and acted.”

As we know, the Conservatives did win a majority, but the promise was reneged on. As my constituent said, it was a clear and simple promise on which they have totally failed to deliver in any way whatever.

While we are on the subject, I draw the Minister's attention to a statement by the then Chancellor during the 2015 election regarding Mersey tunnel fees. He said:

“They will definitely be cut. I think we might be able to go further. I'm quite optimistic that we might be able to go further and abolish them altogether”.

Please, Minister, do not say in responding that this is for local operators to determine. When the Chancellor of the day makes clear statements—promises, no less—it is incumbent on the Government to deliver them. The reputation of this place has had a real shaking in recent times, and no wonder when unambiguous, incontestable promises are made just before an election and jettisoned without a second thought. It destroys the very essence of what politics should be about—honesty and integrity—and replaces it with cynicism and callous disrespect for the public.

I turn to our continuing problems with the Mersey Gateway, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) referred. According to the local campaign group, hundreds of thousands of fines have been issued, and so far about 7,500 penalties have been appealed to the Traffic Penalty Tribunal, which I understand have all been allowed. If that is correct, it must surely encourage the Minister to make enquiries about what on earth is going on. I urge him to look into how these fines are arising. It is clear there are regular issues with people seeing the signs and paying in time. It is far from clear when people have to pay by and how they should pay. Why does it have to always be online?

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Many of my constituents have been affected and are deeply upset, getting continual fines after they thought they had paid

when there was a problem with the system. Paying online is immensely difficult for older people who do not have access to online facilities. Why should they have to go to a shop somewhere to pay? It should not be up to them to find that; it should be up to toll operators, if a toll is to be charged, to make it as easy as possible for people to cross.

Justin Madders: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. The system seems to have been set up to make it as difficult as possible to pay the tolls, which is probably why there are so many difficulties and so many fines. It is the major route to John Lennon airport, and how realistic is it to expect people going on their holidays to pay a toll online by the following day? It is not living in the real world.

There are real concerns about the tactics used by the debt recovery firm once a fine is issued, and about the way costs can escalate to nearly £400 in no time at all. A minimum bailiff charge of £380 for a £2 crossing seems totally disproportionate; it is yet more racketeering. I have heard too many stories of bailiffs turning up unannounced and clamping vehicles before they have spoken to anyone to be confident that they are operating reasonably.

I ask the Minister again to consider that those in the public sector in particular travelling in both directions over the bridge face four-figure increases in their costs just to get to work. I have heard many difficult stories about how people have been affected, including one from a young mum whose husband had a stay in Broadgreen Hospital. It was costing her £15 extra a day just to visit him. She had more than enough to worry about at that time.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. In view of those issues and the Conservative party's promise in 2015, does he agree that now is the time to scrap the Mersey Gateway toll? At the end of the day, the people of the whole region are affected immensely.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The injustice of the situation will get worse in the near future, because when the old Silver Jubilee bridge reopens, it will also be tolled. Can the Minister tell us of any other previously toll-free bridge having tolls introduced in such a way? The bridge was partly funded by Cheshire County Council when Halton was part of it. Should not the successor authorities—Cheshire East Council, and Cheshire West and Chester Council—get some sort of refund, or will my constituents have to pay three times over for the crossing, having paid for the original construction, having paid their road tax, and paying every time they cross the river?

My constituents are absolutely fed up with being considered the soft touch of the north-west. They are fed up with being discriminated against because of where they live, and they are fed up with living in a country where the authorities apparently condone a postcode lottery. Most of all, they are fed up with being treated like fools, through promises made that are never kept and not being treated the same as residents of other areas because it cannot be afforded. Minister, it is time to bring back some fairness and equity. Give these people some hope that they will be treated the same as everyone else, and hope that when there is injustice, the Government will step in to correct it.

11.16 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on securing this debate on transport issues in Cheshire. As it happens, I intend to visit his constituency tomorrow—*[Interruption.]* It is already scheduled. I will visit Argent Energy's biodiesel-from-waste production facility, which is an example of the vital importance of Ellesmere Port to the local and national economy. It will be my first visit out of London since becoming Transport Minister, and I am delighted to do that.

Cheshire is a powerhouse of the northern economy and the UK economy. It is the gateway to the north. It links strongly to its neighbours, the large city regions of Liverpool and Manchester, as well as to the engine of the midlands and, vitally, to north Wales. I recognise that. With its £29.3 billion economy employing over 488,000 people in more than 42,000 businesses, Cheshire is an economic success story and home to almost 920,000 people. The region has particular strengths in advanced manufacturing, science and innovation, and professional services. In fact, Cheshire's economy outperforms the UK average on a number of measures. The local enterprise partnership's strategic economic plan is entitled "Cheshire and Warrington Matters", and I absolutely endorse that view.

The north matters, and transport matters in and to the north. Transport in all its forms and modes is essential for the prosperity, growth and wellbeing of the whole nation. I therefore commend the hon. Gentleman on raising these matters on his constituents' behalf. The Government recognise that good transport infrastructure is essential for productivity, which is why we are investing significantly across the country to deliver sustained economic development.

On 1 April 2018, Transport for the North became a statutory body, according the north powers and funding not seen in other areas to develop and drive forward transport plans, which will support economic growth. The Government have also committed to creating a northern powerhouse to rebalance our economy. Northern Powerhouse Rail, the flagship scheme within TfN's strategic vision, will provide the east-west rail links that the north needs. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to unlock the full potential of the region.

That is part of our long-term economic plan—one that we share with the north. As Transport Minister, I am committed to improving journeys for passengers in the north. We are carrying out the biggest investment in transport in the region for a generation. Between 2015 and 2020, the Government will have spent over £13 billion improving and modernising northern transport.

Faisal Rashid: Does the Minister agree that it is unfair to ask the public to pay those tolls when that bridge has been untolled for decades?

Michael Ellis: I will come to tolling in a moment, but it is a long-established principle that goes back to the 1930s that those roads and tunnels are tolled. Figures from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority show that in the three years to 2021, central Government's planned transport capital investment per head for the north-west, the north-east, Yorkshire and Humber will

be higher than for London, the south-east and the south-west. Each year we will invest an average of £248 per person in the north, compared with £236 per person in the south.

We are investing in a smart motorway from junctions 6 to 8 of the M56, which serves Manchester airport, and from junctions 21A to 26 of the M6, which links Cheshire, Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Lancashire. Those are important additions to other localised improvements such as tackling congestion on the A55, which I understand is a major factor, as well as at the Posthouse roundabout. Improvements at junction 8 of the M62 are designed to support the rapid and significant expansion of the Omega employment site, which now employs more than 5,000 people. In the 2018 Budget, the Government published their objectives for the second road investment strategy for 2020 to 2025, and we intend to make available £25.3 billion to further develop the strategic road network. My Department is developing an affordable, deliverable investment plan for that, which will be published in a few months.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I am sorry that I missed the start of the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Does the Minister agree that the delivery of HS2 is essential for achieving that vision in the north and opening up that capacity?

Michael Ellis: As the hon. Lady knows, we are investing significantly in rail. The reinstatement and reintroduction of services on the Halton curve means that from last month, after a gap of more than 40 years, a direct rail link between the west of Cheshire, north Wales and Liverpool Lime Street now connects those important areas together, unlocking business and opportunities, and providing improved access to the airport. HS2 is, of course, very important, as is the construction of a new station at Warrington West to serve new housing growth. The Northern franchise will lead to the removal of pacers, and brand-new trains will operate on the new Northern Connect service between Liverpool, Warrington Central, Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester airport, as well as a new direct service between Leeds and Chester via Warrington Bank Quay.

Mike Amesbury rose—

Michael Ellis: I am conscious of the time as I want to address the issue of tolls, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mike Amesbury: For every £4 of investment put into London and the south-east, the north gets £1—those are the Government's own figures. The Northwich area in my constituency was promised two trains an hour to Manchester, but that has not been delivered by the failing Northern franchise. On tolls, there was a clear promise, as outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), that a local discount scheme would be extended to Cheshire West, Chester and Warrington, but that promise has not been delivered. Will the Minister answer that point?

Michael Ellis: I will come to that in a moment, as I want to talk a little more about HS2. Despite speculation and claims that we should scrap HS2, our commitment to the full HS2 network remains. From 2027, high-speed

[Michael Ellis]

trains will begin serving Cheshire at Crewe, and the legislative process is under way to extend HS2 to Crewe by 2027—six years earlier than originally planned. For Cheshire, Crewe offers a significant opportunity. We are working actively with local partners to maximise the potential of an HS2 hub at Crewe, both for the wider connectivity to HS2 that that will offer, and for its potential as an agent of change and a significant driver for regeneration and development in and around Crewe, Cheshire and the wider region, including Stoke and Staffordshire.

With Transport for the North we are developing a business case for northern powerhouse rail, and exploring the best options to ensure that the huge economic potential of Warrington and the north Cheshire science corridor is served. Through a £200 million-plus growth deal, we are supporting a significant number of local transport improvements that are vital for people going about their daily business. Those include a new bus station in Chester, bypasses for Congleton, Middlewich and Poynton, and a new highway infrastructure in Crewe, Warrington and Birchwood to alleviate congestion. There is a huge amount of investment. We are also supporting the construction of the new Mersey Gateway crossing, which is the largest local transport scheme in the country and benefits residents of Cheshire, Liverpool city region, and beyond.

Faisal Rashid *rose*—

Michael Ellis: We have just five minutes left, and I wish to get on to tolling. I acknowledge that tolling to support the estuary crossing, and other crossings, is controversial, and it is clear that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston has a major disagreement with the Labour Metro Mayor in his region, who changed the hitherto existing position. He is understandably upset about that, but it is a matter for the Mayor, Steve Rotherham. The hon. Gentleman called the tolls “unconscionable” and “racketeering”, and I have noted his comments.

For the Mersey Gateway we were able to ensure that all eligible residents of Halton Borough Council can use the new bridges for free through the local resident discount scheme. It has been the policy of successive UK Governments—both Labour and Conservative—to place tolls on major estuarial crossings, so that those schemes help to pay for the benefits that people receive in those areas. The Government decided to provide free access for the residents of Halton because of their unusual position, given that the existing bridge connects the two parts of the borough on either side of the River Mersey, and that is the only practicable way of travelling between those areas. We looked at the case for extending free tolling to residents of councils beyond Halton, but decided not to do so because the cost to the Government and local authorities would have been disproportionate and substantial.

Since their construction in the 1930s—I think it was 1934—and again in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Mersey tunnels have always been tolled. This is not new.

Those tremendous feats of engineering were developed, funded and delivered by the local authorities in the area. The Queensway tunnel, which links Birkenhead and Wallasey with Liverpool, opened in 1934. It cost £8 million at the time and ranked financially as the biggest single municipal enterprise ever undertaken in this country. The Kingsway tunnel, which links Wallasey and Liverpool, opened in 1971 and saw the first example of a giant mechanical “mole” being used in this country. These have always been locally owned assets. Both tunnels have been financed by tolling since they opened, with the toll revenue used to cover the costs of operating, maintaining and enhancing the tunnels, as well as repaying the debt accrued during their construction. Decisions on toll levels rest with the Merseyside local authorities and are now vested in the Liverpool city region mayoral combined authority. They are not a matter for Ministers of the Crown; they are a matter for the Liverpool authorities.

The former Chancellor of the Exchequer may have commented on local tolling in a tweet, or whatever it was, as part of the 2015 general election campaign. [Interruption.] Recognition should be given that my Department worked closely with the combined authority on its review of tunnel tolls, which resulted in a reduction of the fast tag toll for motorists. That was good news, and that is what the Department for Transport did at that time. As hon. Members are probably aware, the process for setting tolls for the Mersey tunnels is set out in the Mersey Tunnels Act 2004, which requires the toll charge to be increased annually in line with inflation, and allows—subject to certain conditions—some of the revenue to be used for wider transport objectives in Merseyside. I hope I have assured hon. Members of the Government’s strong commitment to transport in Cheshire.

Faisal Rashid: The Minister is speaking about millions and billions of pounds of investment in the north but he contradicts himself. Part of that investment should come from the national infrastructure fund, rather than from private investors and tolls, including on an existing bridge that was not previously tolled.

Mr Howarth *rose*—

Michael Ellis: If the right hon. Gentleman can make his point in 20 seconds, I will give way to him.

Mr Howarth: Does the Minister accept that having to pay an additional £20 a week just to go to work is unacceptable for my constituents and those of my hon. Friends?

Michael Ellis: I suggest that all hon. Members work actively with their regional Mayors and with Cheshire West and Chester Council to explore what may or may not be possible.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Universal Credit and Debt

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered universal credit and debt.

Universal credit affects a huge proportion of our population already. As of April this year, 2 million people were on universal credit, and in the last three months more than 200,000 extra households each month have started a claim. By the time it is fully rolled out, around 7 million households, comprising around 15 million people, will be on universal credit—almost one quarter of the population and 28% of people under pension age—and around 38% of our children will be growing up in households on universal credit. It will affect a whole generation.

The impact of universal credit is felt not only at an individual, but at a societal level, so it is incredibly important that we get it right. That is why I set up the all-party parliamentary group on universal credit, to collect evidence and make recommendations. I thank all those parliamentarians here today on both sides of the House who have contributed to that very productive group, alongside our colleagues in the Lords, charities and researchers. I must especially mention Holly in my office, who has been running it as a labour of love.

Most of all, I thank the individuals who are claiming universal credit, particularly all those who responded to the social media outreach that I and Parliament have done for this debate, telling us about their often very personal experiences. The amount of money we have affects not just our bank balance, but our ability to look after both our physical health, in terms of affording housing and enough to eat, medication and travel to health appointments, and our mental health, particularly when we get into debt.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Does she agree that until relatively recently there was a broad political consensus on the need to revise the labyrinth of welfare dependency and the bureaucracy surrounding it, but that that should be done in a way that minimises the impact that she has just been outlining and that many of our constituents are suffering from?

Ruth George: I agree; it was a laudable aim, but unfortunately it is not happening in practice, as shown in some of the evidence. That is why I secured this debate.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. We have had numerous debates on universal credit, and I have said this before and will say it again: we should call a halt to universal credit, and if it cannot be reformed we should disband it, because people are suffering as a result. We also now have the working poor, including in cities such as Coventry, where last year 20,000 people used food banks. When we think about it, the impact that that is having on people is incredible.

Ruth George: I hope the evidence I will bring today, and the evidence colleagues will bring from their own experiences, will help to make that case without my having to make it explicitly. There are certainly many changes that should be made. The evidence I have heard from people who say that it is not just the amount of money they have on universal credit, but their powerlessness against a system that takes deductions seemingly at random and with no recourse to justice, that leaves them feeling absolutely hopeless and in despair.

One man from Wales told me on social media:

“It is very difficult to manage on universal credit, payments are very low...I’ve had to go without food to have heat and vice versa. This with my health condition has led me into depression & despair at times. Universal credit are always deducting monies eg carers allowance etc which has left me worse off. It’s very difficult to get through to talk to anyone via phone and very often treated as a second class citizen.”

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent case for changes to universal credit. Pertinent to what she is saying about people being left unable to pay, does she share my concern that 51% of the food parcels that the Salvation Army distributes are to people who come as a result of having insufficient support from the universal credit system? Does she agree that maybe we should put back the money that was taken out of the budget?

Ruth George: Absolutely. My local jobcentre also tells me that the major reason why people are seeking support with food parcels is that they simply do not have enough to get by on, often because of the deductions.

A mum from East Anglia told me that she has had to resort to loan sharks, and she almost got involved with a man just so that he could buy some food for her and her daughter. Now she has had letters saying that money will be deducted for her debts. She has lost jobs because she could not afford a bus pass and she has friends who resorted to selling their body for food because of their children.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con) *rose*—

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab) *rose*—

Ruth George: I will go across the House first.

Dr Poulter: The hon. Lady is making some good points, and she is right to draw an association between adverse life events, debt and poor mental health. On the issue facing many of the people she is using as examples, who are experiencing difficulties with universal credit, is it not the case that the wait of five weeks to receive universal credit exacerbates debt issues and the challenges facing people in sometimes very difficult circumstances, and that the Government perhaps need to look at that as a priority in helping to improve the system?

Ruth George: The hon. Gentleman has pre-empted part of my speech. The five-week wait for payments is doing a tremendous amount of damage, putting people into debt right at the start of their claim.

That is not to say that universal credit has not improved—I am sure we will hear a lot about that from the Minister. I pay credit to the Department for listening,

[*Ruth George*]

and especially to the current Secretary of State, who has made changes beyond those forced on her by High Court cases. However, there is still an enormous amount to do to help people to get by and feel secure with universal credit.

Ellie Reeves: A number of my constituents are living below the poverty line, because that is what their universal credit calculation assesses them as being entitled to. It is not surprising that three quarters of those who are in rent arrears are on universal credit, while only one quarter are not. Does my hon. Friend agree that the way we calculate welfare payments to the most vulnerable must be looked at again?

Ruth George: Absolutely. As I will come on to discuss, the problem is not only welfare payments, but the deductions made from those welfare payments. People who are already in poverty are having huge deductions taken from their incomes with almost no recourse to justice.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ruth George: I will take one final intervention, then I must make progress.

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. This is a point that I imagine the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) will elaborate on, but the Highland Council's budgets have been hit to the extent of £2.5 million just from dealing with universal credit. That money is money that we could be spending on classroom assistants, who are facing swingeing cuts not of their own making. Should that money not really be repaid to the Highland Council to make up for all this?

Ruth George: All councils need an uplift in their budget, but if the Department for Work and Pensions was to give money away, I would say it should go into the pockets of the people who are suffering at the sharpest end of universal credit.

We have already seen four years of a benefits freeze that has cut more than 6% from those benefits. That is on top of the three-year freeze in 2011 and the 1% benefit cap from 2014. On housing, the impact of those freezes, together with limiting local housing allowance to the lowest 30% of rents, means that now tenants in 97% of areas must make up a rent shortfall out of their universal credit. In one in five areas, that shortfall for a family with children in a two-bedroom home is at least £100 month, Shelter has calculated. That is a huge amount taken out of an already low income, but universal credit will mean even more reductions.

With managed migration having been delayed, most people will transfer on to universal credit due to a change in circumstances—anything from having their first baby, losing a job or moving to a different local authority area. Those 5 million or so households are not due to receive any transitional protection if they were better off on legacy benefits. Contrary to what Parliament was promised when the cuts to universal credit were pushed through in 2015 and 2016, most people will immediately be worse off.

Even after the changes to universal credit, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has calculated that, although 5.6 million people in working households will gain an average of £3,000 a year, 5.1 million working people will lose an average of £2,300, including 1.7 million who are already in poverty. Of non-working households, 1.9 million people will gain an average of £2,000 a year, but 2.6 million people will lose an average of £1,400 a year, with half of those—1.3 million—already in poverty. Overall, even after the changes, 7.5 million people will gain from universal credit, but 7.7 million people will lose out, including 3 million households already in poverty. While the Government may state that more is being spent on universal credit, which may well be correct, that does not change the fact that the majority of people already on very low incomes, many of whom are in poverty, will be worse off.

Even those who are supposed to be better off on universal credit often struggle because of the deductions from their payments. According to yesterday's written answer from the Minister, who I thank for responding in time for the debate:

"Of all eligible claims to Universal Credit Full Service due a payment in Feb 2019, 57% (840,000 claims) had a deduction."

An answer to a further parliamentary question showed that an average of 10% of all universal credit is now deducted from people's claims. Almost everyone seeing deductions took the advance payment introduced to help people get through the minimum five-week wait for their first payment. Some 60% of people take that advance, mainly because rent is payable in advance, whereas universal credit is payable in arrears. That advance has to be paid off over 12 months, so people are paying 13 months' rent out of 12 months of income. With a system that in 97% of areas does not even give enough money each month for one month's rent, it is not surprising that people are struggling, and that five-week wait is absolutely part of that.

On top of repayments for advances, another 440,000 households are also repaying at least one other debt for benefit overpayments, social fund loans or other advances. That does not include third-party debts such as rent arrears, utility bills or council tax debt. The Department does not keep data on those debts that it also deducts. I question why not, as it clearly has the data on the deductions being made and should monitor the impact on vulnerable people. Of those 840,000 households seeing deductions, half were of up to 20% of the standard allowance in universal credit, 170,000 were between 21% and 30%, 238,000 were between 31% and 40%, and 13,000 were above 40%.

With 40% of the standard allowance as the current maximum deduction supposed to be permitted under universal credit, that means deductions of £127 a month for a single person's claim or £200 a month for a couple. Of the 3.3 million couple-parents already losing an average of £2,500 a year under universal credit—more than £200 a month—a majority see deductions on top of those losses of up to another £200 a month, plus their rent top-up of around £100 a month, so many will be £500 a month, or more than £100 a week, worse off.

It is not surprising that we see such an increase in people going to food banks and struggling with debt, like one of my constituents, Gareth, who is struggling to keep his head above water. He suffers from anxiety and depression. His mother died recently and he split

from his partner so had to move into his own place and claim universal credit. He had been working as a cleaner but had to give up his job. He was awarded universal credit of £692 a month, including £374 for housing, although the lowest rent he could find is £500 a month, so he has to make up the shortfall of £126 a month. Some £58 a month is being deducted for his advance payment, and £46 a month for an earlier budgeting and crisis loan, leaving him with £588 a month, of which his rent is £500, so he is left with just £20 a week for all his bills and food. He is experiencing extreme poverty, which is obviously impacting on his health.

Those deductions are things he knows about, but many are not. The second highest number of deductions are for tax credit overpayments, and two thirds of people migrating on to universal credit from tax credits are seeing deductions for an overpayment. The Treasury states that £6.9 billion of tax credit overpayments will be transferred on to universal credit. The reduction in the excess earnings limit in one year from £5,000 to just £1,000 in 2012 has meant that constant overpayments are now hard-wired into tax credits, but in many cases these are historical.

Only 29% of that £6.9 billion relates to 2016-17 onwards. More than half relates to between 2011-12 and 2015-16, and 16% is even older. Many people just were not aware of these overpayments and are not given the opportunity to challenge them. Locally, I have the case of Mrs G, who has a disability. She migrated on to universal credit because she had to move into accessible accommodation, which happened to be in the neighbouring local authority. Only after she had claimed was informed that she had tax credit overpayments of around £450 from 2011 and £850 from 2005. She had not claimed tax credits since 2015, and had paid off the only overpayments of which she had been informed over the next two years. She challenged the overpayments through Derbyshire County Council's welfare rights service, which is marvellous at handling these cases, but was told that she had been informed about them in 2011 and 2006, and as the Inland Revenue had not received a dispute within three months of those letters being sent, the overpayments could not be challenged.

After losing her disability premiums, Mrs G was already £43 a week worse off under universal credit—almost £200 a month. She was having £42 a month deducted to repay her advance payment and was left with only £169 a month. A further £48 a month was then deducted for her tax credit overpayments, which she faces for years to come. Faced with having to live with a serious disability on just £121 a month, and with no one in government prepared to look into her case, the welfare rights service told me that Mrs G's mental health deteriorated rapidly and that, on new year's day, she attempted to take her life. Fortunately the attempt did not succeed, and she is now being supported by her GP, but five months later the issue is still not resolved, even with expert advice and her local MP contacted. Mrs G says, "it's on my mind all of the time", and it is still affecting her health.

The inability to challenge deductions—or even, in some cases, to find out about them—leaves people feeling utterly helpless and either angry or hopeless. People often receive a note on their journal saying:

"We agreed to pay a fine from your universal credit",

but they are not even told how much the fine is, where it comes from or how to challenge it. I have seen cases of much more than the 40% limit being taken from people's standard allowance, leaving them with practically nothing to live on. Advisers on the universal credit helpline have been unhelpful and aggressive, even to Citizens Advice and the welfare rights service.

Real examples like those from in and around my constituency, where limited numbers of people are on universal credit, bear out the problems illustrated in those answers to parliamentary questions. They are key drivers for the increase in food bank use and debt and rent arrears, and are a significant reason for the huge increase in depression and anxiety.

The Government must act. It will not necessarily take anything very radical. Many of the actions have already been agreed, but they need to be brought forward and done now. We need to look at the five-week wait, as I think is agreed across the House, and at the very least, as a first step, bring forward the two-week run-on of jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance and income support from July 2020 to July 2019. The maximum 30% cap on deductions needs to apply now, not in October, when another 800,000 people will have applied for universal credit and be suffering 40% reductions. And people suffering hardship should be able to reduce that.

The extended repayment period for advances from 12 months to 16 months should apply now, not in October 2021. Historical tax credit overpayments should be written off, as the Government stated they were doing back in 2011. Later overpayments should be proved and the opportunity given to challenge them properly before they are collected. The benefit freeze needs to be ended and the cap on rents restored at least to the 30th percentile. And the monthly assessment period should be reviewed, as the High Court has stated it should be.

Just the measures that I have listed would be an enormous help for the hundreds of thousands of people—almost 1 million—suffering already under deductions from universal credit. If this is test and learn, those people are the guinea pigs that this Government are experimenting on. The Government can make changes. We in Parliament get a second chance at legislation, but the people who are suffering this system now are left with spiralling debts, to which they can see no end. They are driven by the unresponsive system even to try to take their own life. They do not get a second chance at living a better life. Their children do not get another chance at a childhood not marred by poverty. Another 60,000 families will apply for universal credit next week. That is why it is not just our job but our absolute duty to get it right.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. In addition to thanking the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for her exemplary and moving speech, I point out that a lot of right hon. and hon. Members are hoping to speak, so we will have a limit of between two and three minutes on speeches—voluntarily, at the moment.

2.52 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I hope that as I am the only speaker from the Government side, you might show me a little leniency, Sir Henry, but anyway, it is a

[Peter Aldous]

pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing the debate.

The full roll-out of universal credit in Lowestoft started in May 2016. The process has not been straightforward. Many of the most vulnerable in society have been put under enormous pressure and have faced real challenges in getting by day to day. The situation has improved: the Government have listened and introduced changes. However, much more needs to be done if universal credit is to achieve its goals of transforming people's lives in a positive way; encouraging and supporting them into work; and simplifying the welfare system.

I sense that at the outset, the sheer scale of the task of introducing universal credit was not recognised. It is a mammoth task that requires a complete change of mindset by everyone involved and the implementation of an enormous IT project. Some of the assumptions on which universal credit was based have been shown to be idealistic and could not be implemented in a fair way in the real world.

Jobcentres, citizens advice bureaux and councils have stepped up to the plate and really worked hard to get the new system working fairly and properly. As I said, the Government have been listening, and have introduced changes to improve the roll-out. They are right to adopt the test and learn approach, but more needs to be done to ensure that debt, which burdens people, causing distress and worry, does not unnecessarily build up. I shall quickly highlight five areas in which action is required to alleviate the albatross of arrears.

First, serious consideration needs to be given to abolishing the five-week wait for universal credit. The think-tank Bright Blue has concluded that the initial waiting period is a design feature that is inherently flawed. Secondly, the feedback that I am receiving from constituents is that the lack of transitional protection for former recipients of the severe disability premium is pushing claimants into debt. The Government need to get on with addressing that.

Thirdly, universal credit needs to be adapted to address the needs of those on zero-hours contracts. Quite often, such work is heavily affected by the weather, and during lull periods, in which people claim universal credit, the delay in payments leads to an inescapable spiral of debt, which is never paid off from one season to another.

Fourthly, there is compelling evidence from organisations supporting those facing domestic violence that the single payment arrangements are putting the victims of domestic violence at added risk, with perpetrators having universal credit payments paid into their own bank accounts. That means that they can use the money as a tool for coercive control. To address that, universal credit payments should be separate by default.

Finally, East Suffolk Citizens Advice has advised me that the Department for Work and Pensions does not provide it with feedback when it makes a request for assistance with the journal of a client whom it is supporting. I appreciate that there are data protection requirements, but that issue needs to be fully addressed if universal support is to be fully effective.

I commend both the Minister and the relatively new Secretary of State—I hope that she stays in her post—for listening and responding. I acknowledge that theirs is a

difficult task, but I urge them to take on board the further feedback from this debate. For the sake of the vulnerable people who rely on universal credit, we must get it right.

2.56 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on an absolutely outstanding opening speech. There is not much more that one can say. However, I will pick up on a few points.

To understand the rise in poverty that people are facing across the country—not in isolated areas, as some on the Government side would like to say—we need look no further than social security policies, unfortunately, and universal credit is a key aspect of that. The Child Poverty Action Group said back in 2015 that an additional 1 million children would be living in poverty. Just a couple of weeks ago, Policy in Practice estimated, on behalf of the Children's Commissioner, that half of low-income households would lose nearly £3,500 a year, which will see child poverty double. The figure is already at 4 million—three quarters of the children living in poverty are from working families—and it is set to double. That is down to three social security policies: the two-child limit, the benefits cap and universal credit—particularly, as my hon. Friend said, the five-week wait, and the repayment not just of the advance loan but of other debts.

We recognise the intervention in last autumn's Budget, but it is paltry compared with the £12 billion that was cut in the 2015 summer Budget. It did not go even halfway to restoring what was cut. It is still the case that 40% of people on UC will be and are worse off—this applies especially to disabled people; 1 million disabled people are worse off under universal credit—by nearly £2,000. It also applies to the self-employed and single parents; they are all worse off as a result of universal credit. We have touched on the natural migration that is happening, separately from managed migration, as a result of a change in circumstances.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, said last month that the UK's poorest people face lives that are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”. He accused Ministers of being in a state of denial about the impact of policies, including the roll-out of universal credit, and referred to the “systematic immiseration” of a significant part of the British population. I know that his comments have caused some consternation on the Government side, but we have only to look at Westminster tube station to see our homeless people. Two thirds of those in homeless refuges are people who have issues with universal credit. We all have constituency cases—I shall mention a few if that is okay, Sir Henry—of people who are really suffering.

Sally is a single mum who moved out to escape an abusive relationship. Due to her change in circumstances, she has lost £400 from her universal credit. Katie's employers made a mess of their returns, and she was left with £67 to live on. It was her employer's error. She said:

“Every time I call they just say there's nothing they can do and I just have to wait for a decision. Please help me as I'm at the end of hope!”

June was in receipt of employment and support allowance with a severe disability premium. Again due to a change in circumstances, she lost £300 a month. Karen works for the Greater Manchester police and has a two-year-old daughter. She was told by the jobcentre that universal credit would pay for 85% of her childcare. She had to pay it up front, but she was still waiting six months later. That is unacceptable, and it is happening up and down the country.

The Minister will be aware that universal credit has a bad press. In debates such as this, it is our job to draw attention to the dire circumstances that people are facing. There are also rumours, based on leaked emails, that there is a planned propaganda exercise to try to restore the public's faith in universal credit. I would be grateful if the Minister could address that. I have gone over my time, so I will end there.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I am afraid we will now have to move to a two-minute limit on speeches.

3.1 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this debate.

In Inverness and the highlands, we have had universal credit for six years. Thanks to the Tory-Lib Dem coalition, we were already suffering from austerity. There was one food bank in Inverness. With the addition of universal credit, problems rocketed. We now have a food bank in every quarter of the city and beyond. My constituents face choosing between buying clothes for their children, switching on the heating and putting food on the table.

Other hon. Members will recommend changes, but given the extremely limited time that I have, I will focus on the debt accumulated for every single household in Highland, and give a warning to hon. Members who are dealing with universal credit in their constituency case-loads. Highland Council has incurred debts, directly attributed to universal credit, of £2.5 million. Of those debts, £600,000 is directly due to administrative costs resulting from universal credit. The details of those costs have been provided to the Minister and the UK Government. They have said in written answers to questions that no council should bear an additional burden or debt as a result of universal credit, yet it is a fact that this debt is out there.

It is incumbent on the Minister and his Government to sort this out now for the people of the highlands, to repay the money that those people are due, and to ensure that councils across the rest of Scotland, and the other nations of the UK, are not similarly burdened. This shambolic roll-out of universal credit continues to cause harm in people's homes and to their health, and to harm those who are not directly involved in universal credit.

3.3 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Sir Henry. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this debate, and for her excellent speech setting out the issues. In the time I have, it is not possible to repeat the arguments, but it is clear

from the experiences hon. Members have related, from all parts of the United Kingdom, that universal credit is not working.

The Trussell Trust is heavily involved in this debate, and it supports the points put by my hon. Friend, particularly regarding the five-week wait. This subject comes up frequently. In both Houses in the past year, there have been 1,858 references, 70 debates, seven written statements and two Divisions on universal credit, yet we do not seem to be any further forward.

The overwhelming majority of experiences quoted in debates and put forward in questions about universal credit are negative. There is no doubt that it is increasing hardship. The Government must recognise the problems being caused. It has been suggested that it is a flexible and personalised system offering unprecedented support, but that is clearly not the case. We need firm action from Ministers, not just assurances about mitigating the worst effects.

In the few seconds remaining, I ask the Minister whether he thinks it is reasonable, when people are facing such dreadful financial hardship, for the Department to spend over £23 million advertising universal credit in a single newspaper, the *Metro*? I feel that is a shocking waste of money. *[Interruption.]* I have received a written parliamentary answer from the Department showing that it is true. I would welcome the Minister's comments on that.

3.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for bringing this debate. As I often do, I will give a quick example. A troubled young man from my constituency, from a good family, is unable to deal with his social situation and finds himself sleeping rough. As he is a new claimant, he has to move on to universal credit. He goes to the housing executive, which tells him that he is not a priority, and to self-refer to a hostel. He depends on his family.

I want to put on record that the staff at the Ards benefits office—Frances, the manager, Lee and Donna—are tremendous and exceptional. If every person had such people to respond to them, it would be very helpful. They do their best to help, but they can only do what the system allows them to do.

Due to problems in the past, my constituent is already paying £10 a week out of his jobseeker's allowance, and £40 a month comes off his housing benefit, which leaves him with £30 to live on. Internet is essential for those making online claims. What if somebody cannot use the library or another place with wi-fi? He waits five weeks for a claim that is not even back paid. What if he did not have a loving family, doing what no one would expect them to do for a 40-year-old man? Is this system working? I say to the Minister: it is not—far from it.

I meet people with severe and immediate financial hardship every day. Nearly a quarter—24%—of all universal credit claimants have a deduction of above 20% of their standard allowance. Research by StepChange found that even a deduction of 5% would push nearly half of StepChange clients on benefits into a negative budget. When a 40% deduction is applied—these are serious figures—70% will be pushed into a negative budget.

[Jim Shannon]

I ask the Minister: can we give staff such as Frances, Lee and Donna in the social security office in Newtownards the opportunity to read a situation, and allow them the discretion to allow past bad debt to be repaid at a nominal rate? We should understand that the private sector does not understand the bedroom tax, and rent does not come down to what the Government say it should be. It just does not work.

3.7 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on her speech. It is a fact that more people who go on to universal credit are seeking debt advice. In my constituency, 90% of new claimants in social housing go into rent arrears. Of those, 60% go into arrears of over £600. Those who can least afford the benefits freeze have been hit the hardest by it. We have talked about the five-week wait and the advances. [Interruption.]

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. We have a Division. I will suspend the sitting for 15 minutes, assuming there is one Division. We can resume with the hon. Lady when we come back.

3.8 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.20 pm

On resuming—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. The debate will now conclude at 12 minutes past 4.

Yvonne Fovargue: Thank you, Sir Henry. I was talking about the five-week wait and advances. Even with a 30% payment back, 65% of StepChange clients who are in debt will still have problems paying. They will still have problems paying their gas, electricity and other bills. I want to ask the Minister how advisers ensure that repayments are affordable. I believe that there are safeguards, but I have never heard what they are. Do they use a single financial statement, as most creditors do? Do they look at other debts? We know that many people on universal credit who have had the five-week wait have other debts. They have gone to high-cost lenders and owe on the gas and electricity.

I also want to ask the Minister whether the debts to Departments are included in the proposed breathing space scheme. That would be a help. At least it would give people time to work it out, but unless the DWP accepts affordable repayments, even that will not help people on universal credit who are being forced into debt. I have always said that simplifying the system was a great aim, but people's lives are not simple, and the people I am talking about are the ones who can least afford a bump in the road. Throwing people into debt makes life more complicated. It makes more people go to the doctor with mental health problems and depression, and eventually it costs the state more.

3.22 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This is a great opportunity for the Minister—a valuable chance to hear from different constituencies about the situation of those claiming benefits through universal credit.

Gloucester's experience broadly mirrors that of the country over the past 18 months. The roll-out has steadily expanded. By February, just over 4,000 people were on universal credit. That represents 26% of our population—slightly more than the 24% figure for Great Britain as a whole, and marginally less than the figure for the south-west region, which is 27%. The figures have continued to rise and I suspect in Gloucester it is now close to 5,000 people.

I pay tribute to the staff of Jobcentre Plus, especially the work coaches, who are implementing the policy and working closely with my office when constituents have difficulties. It is of course true that there are difficulties, and 117 of my constituents have been in touch with me and my office about issues. The vast majority of them are having difficulties with application forms. One of my staff, who is dyslexic, did the form herself. It took her seven minutes. I have tested it myself and it took me marginally longer, but broadly the application form is challenging only for those without personal internet access or much experience of digital processing. That, of course, is why the contract with Citizens Advice is so important.

I shall briefly share the Citizens Advice experience of UC inquiries, which is important. First, the calculation of benefit entitlements is more transparent than under legacy benefits, which is, of course, a significant improvement. Secondly, with the exception of those in receipt of disability benefits, it sees little difference between UC and legacy benefits. Thirdly, the increased availability of advance payments has improved the situation, but further flexibility would, it is noted, be beneficial. The last comment is that it is fairly commonly recognised that those in receipt of disability benefits are worse off than they would be under the previous system. Perhaps the Minister could comment on that. In my experience the situation is varied. People suffering from multiple sclerosis have quite often received greater benefits than previously, so there seems to be a little variation from disability to disability.

Clearly, debt is an important issue. Large numbers of our constituents have debt issues. More research is needed on how those debt issues arise and why so many people have so much debt when they come on to universal credit. That is, of course, a wider issue than universal credit itself.

3.25 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I shall be very brief. I know that there are many aspects to universal credit, but I want to focus on the in-built five-week wait, which is pushing people into severe hardship and is cruel in the extreme. To say that advance payments address that is simply disingenuous, since those payments are unaffordable loans by another name, offering claimants the Hobson's choice of hardship now or hardship later. That must urgently be addressed.

The loans have to be repaid and take no account of people's ability to repay them. That is how other loans work, but the DWP advance payment loans have repayments set at a fixed level, which can be hard to challenge even if people fall into financial hardship while trying to repay them. Renegotiating repayment levels is rare, but even if someone manages it, they are by that time already likely to be in serious financial difficulty with other bills.

The debt that people are pushed into can sometimes overwhelm them, or can undermine them so much that entering or sustaining employment becomes a much greater challenge, as people are forced to rely on food banks. The only way to deal with that pernicious aspect of universal credit is to remove the need for bridging loans by ending the five-week wait. There should be a single, non-refundable assessment payment for all claimants during the five-week wait period, with immediate effect.

If the Minister does nothing else today, or during his time with his current portfolio, he can and should do one thing: abolish the five-week wait. By doing so, he could make life much easier for many households who are struggling under the system as it is currently designed.

3.27 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing the debate.

There is an argument for a simplified benefit system, but what we know of universal credit is that it has led to many cases where people are trapped in further poverty owing to the way the system is administered. In its current form, it is causing too much hardship and stress. Every week my constituency office, like many others, supports local people who have been placed in difficult situations. I also work closely with the citizens advice bureau, providing support jointly to constituents in need of advice and support. According to my local citizens advice bureau, the issue of universal credit was raised with it on 1,882 occasions last year. I think that that highlights the scale of the need.

I want to mention advance payments. Because of the wait before people get their first payment, many fall into debt. People clearly need the advance in the initial period, as they have no money to live. However, the repayments are often too high and that leads to continuing debt problems, which cause anxiety and stress. There is much confusion about the repayment period for advance payments. In my constituency, although the maximum period is 12 months, I have heard of cases where repayment is expected within three months. Again, that causes further debt, anxiety and stress. Claimants have a choice of repayment period up to a maximum of 12 months, and up to 40% of their claim.

As we have heard this afternoon, the Government are planning changes to the repayment period, which will be a maximum of 16 months, with deductions of no more than 30% of the claim. Those changes are in the right direction, but they do not go far enough. We have heard more today about looking at other debts, and that is an avenue that it is important to explore. The disappointing thing is that we have to wait until the end of the year for the changes to take effect.

I ask the Minister to give us clarity about the changes and to make them a lot sooner. People need help now, because they are in debt now. They are using food banks more than ever. Will the Minister and the Government take note and take action as soon as possible?

3.29 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Henry.

This debate is in stark contrast to the advertisements for universal credit that we see in certain newspapers.

Those adverts should not include a DWP or universal credit logo; those advertisements would not look out of place in an episode of "Jackanory". As a constituent pointed out to me yesterday, one advertisement mentioned the advance payment, but did not say it was a loan. Does that advance come in wrapping paper and ribbon? The advance payment is a loan, and the Government cannot keep denying that or saying that it is something else. That loan is adding to universal credit debt, as is the five-week wait. As has been said, many of those leaving work were paid weekly or fortnightly, and they then have to wait five weeks. People are refusing the advance because it is a loan.

Some 60% of those with debt reductions are not getting the help they need from creditors, so they are borrowing more money. Those with deductions on universal credit are becoming more reliant on foodbanks, and Scottish Welfare Fund crisis grants are increasing all the time as a result. Some 40% of those with deductions are also behind with other household bills, such as food or fuel—it is a circle. My great fear is that the Government are not following Cabinet Office guidelines on debt collection, and that this is become a loan shark's charter. This is a serious issue, and I hope that the Minister and his Department will get a grip on how they deal with debts and universal credit.

3.31 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this important debate. With the best will in the world, this seems to have become a state-devised system that, by its design, drives people into gross financial hardship. We have heard about the difficulties of the five-week wait, and about the 40% repayment rate on any debt that occurs. We have not talked about the advance up-front costs of childcare payments and the 85% payment that can be obtained through universal credit.

My constituent is 21. She is a single parent and has an apprenticeship in a doctor's surgery. She is paid the lower apprenticeship rate, and takes home just £111 a week. She has to pay her childcare upfront. The element of childcare provision in her UC was suspended, and because she obviously required that childcare, she ended up with more than £2,000 of debt. Only the fact that her parents could bail her out helped her through that difficult situation, and an intervention from my office subsequently got that money repaid.

How can we have a system that drives people into debt? There is undoubtedly a link between the two things. It could be rental debt; a local housing association stated that after the launch of universal credit its rent arrears increased immediately, and that as of June 2018, UC claimants accounted for 40% of its overall rent debt. That cannot be allowed to continue. In 2009-10, 350 people used the local food bank, but recent figures suggest that that number is now 2,525. That food bank is now so overburdened that it will have to close to focus on its core system—something has to change.

3.33 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I also wanted to mention childcare payments, but I will write to the Minister separately and concentrate my remarks on tax credit debt.

[Karin Smyth]

Three weeks ago, I was told in an answer to a parliamentary question that 255,000 claimants—one in six universal credit claimants—had received a deduction for alleged historical tax credit overpayments. Last week, in widely reported coverage, Citizens Advice stated that the figure was actually 410,000, which is closer to a quarter of all claimants. Will the Minister clarify that point and say which figure is most accurate? Even the lower figure of a quarter of a million overpayments and the associated debt, as a result of problems within HMRC that are perhaps years old or involve arbitrarily fixed rates that do not reflect people's wider circumstances, are a real problem. Crucially, many people do not know that they can challenge that overpayment, and its impact is considerable.

I urge the Minister to put in place a new minimum repayment threshold for all non-fraud overpayments or other DWP debt. That threshold should genuinely reflect living costs and not discourage claimants from seeking work. There must be flexibility to consider individual circumstances, and claimants should be encouraged to complete income and expenditure forms, and only be asked to pay what they can afford. No family should ever receive less than their standard allowance or be worse off in employment, and no family should be forced into greater debt by the actions of the DWP.

3.35 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this debate. Leigh has been a pilot area for universal credit since 2013, so as a representative of a northern town with extensive experience of universal credit, I can say with certainty and after countless surgeries that it is driving people into poverty, into food banks, and into debt.

We know that universal credit is not working because a recent report by the Association of Retained Council Housing found that in the north of England, 75% of universal credit households were in arrears, compared with 39% of non-universal credit households. In our local authority, universal credit tenants have £1.9 million of rent arrears, which is a shocking £534 per tenant on average. Those are not isolated cases; that is caused by the failing system. With a 97% likelihood of local universal credit claimants falling into arrears, only a total and fundamental overhaul of our welfare system will suffice.

The hard reality facing those going on to universal credit is a choice between a lengthy delay for the first payment or an unaffordable loan that only kicks the can of financial hardship further down the road. Since universal credit was introduced in Leigh, my mailbox has been full of individuals desperate to receive assistance because, through no fault of their own, they have found themselves let down by a system that is so complicated that they struggle to navigate it. How do the Government respond? The Minister can take one of two paths: either he will listen to the facts, stories and experts, or he will follow the Chancellor's example and claim there is no crisis. For the sake of my constituents who are tackling mounting debt, I sincerely hope he will choose the former path.

3.37 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this debate, on her fantastic speech, and on her fantastic, dedicated work on welfare. She is a tireless campaigner.

As many of today's contributions and evidence from Citizens Advice Scotland have shown, debt is built into the universal credit system. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) spoke about survivors of domestic abuse, and I too wish to focus on that important area. Survivors of domestic abuse often flee relationships with little or no resources, and often after being subjected to economic abuse. For them, the five-week wait is particularly damaging. Although advances are available, that is a loan that must be paid back.

The charity Refuge recommends that survivors of domestic abuse be exempt from repaying advances, as the initial period after fleeing an abusive relationship can be costly. People often have to buy a lot of possessions and set up a new home and a new life. If they have to repay an advance, their future income will be heavily reduced. I hope the Minister will consider that issue and tell me his thoughts.

As I have highlighted previously, single household payments can easily be used by coercive or abusive partners to trap people in an abusive relationship. Rent arrears accumulated under single payments mean that survivors have restricted options when they are fleeing, and it is common for landlords to refuse to accept tenants who have arrears, even if those arrears were accrued due to domestic abuse. That huge issue must be ironed out.

I wanted to talk about some constituency cases today, but I do not have time. The constituency cases that we raise time and again in respect of universal credit are not unique; this is happening everywhere. This issue is raised on the doorsteps, in our surgeries and with our neighbours. It is such a huge issue and I am fed up with speaking about this cruel system that does not work. The Government must take their fingers out of their ears and stop defending it. They must work with Members across the House who have spoken up about this issue, stop this system and rehaul it once and for all.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Before I call the SNP spokesman, I thank right hon. and hon. Members for showing so much restraint. The Opposition spokesmen can now go from eight minutes to 10 minutes. I call Mr Neil Gray.

3.39 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Henry. It is a pleasure to serve under your astute chairmanship, which has allowed a bit of latitude in the debate and for so many voices to be heard. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing the debate. She covered a lot of ground in her speech and I will try my best to sum up her contribution and the other important contributions that have been made.

The hon. Lady spoke about deductions being taken, apparently at random. I totally agree. She also mentioned carer's allowance. She may not be aware that in Scotland

we have looked to do something different on carer's allowance. We are uprating carer's allowance to better acknowledge, in some small way, the great work that carers do in our society. I encourage her to look at that.

The hon. Lady was right to say that universal credit has improved. There have been some improvements of late, and I am sure she would agree that the changes appear to acknowledge some of the problems that we have all been campaigning on, but do not go the full distance in terms of resolving the problems that are clearly still there—for instance, the two-child policy, the benefit freeze and the five-week wait. I will come back to some of those. She was also right to highlight the so-called major budget interventions that were made by the Government on universal credit. They do not come close to making up for the cuts that were made to it in the 2015 Budget, which made it almost unrecognisable from what was originally envisaged. I commend the hon. Lady on her speech.

The hon. Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) touched on the issue of separate payments. The Scottish Government and the previous Administration in Northern Ireland have looked to try to resolve that, and I would encourage the UK Government to look at that again and to stop insisting on charging for that.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) is an authoritative voice on the subject, and it was good to see her here. She was right to draw on the evidence put forward by Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty. The UK Government have chosen to attack him personally, rather than to address the issues that he has quite legitimately raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) has possibly the greatest experience of us all on the impact of universal credit. He was right to raise the issue of the £2.5 million debt that Highland Council now finds itself in, and the £600,000 in administration costs that the UK Government should be paying up for. Of course, it is a triple whammy: UK Government austerity on public finances, UK Government austerity on personal finances and now the local authorities have that added burden on their services.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) did, I commend DWP staff, who try to resolve the issues we raise with them. They do their best to deal with those issues within the stringent policies implemented by UK Ministers.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) was absolutely right about advanced childcare costs—I have had many similar cases. I find it incredible that universal credit is paid in arrears, yet the bills that people have to pay on childcare must largely be paid in advance.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) looked to paint a particular picture on universal credit. I encourage him to look at the Citizens Advice Scotland report and briefing that was available ahead of the debate. I think it would contradict and enlighten him greatly.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) pre-empted much of what I have to say on the five-week wait. I appreciate her

intervention. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) dissected the DWP's propaganda regarding universal credit that has been out of late.

I also commend the hon. Members for Easington (Grahame Morris), Bristol South (Karin Smyth), Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), Leigh (Jo Platt) and Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). This has been a very broad debate, with many good contributions.

As has already been highlighted, there are a number of issues at play on universal credit and debt. I am grateful to Scope, Shelter, the Child Poverty Action Group, StepChange and Citizens Advice Scotland for their briefings.

The first issue is the five-week wait. I appreciate that the Government have at least partially acknowledged that there is a problem, by looking to extend certain legacy benefits and to expand advance payments. However, much of the run-on for legacy benefits will not happen until next year, and no run-on help is available for those who are in touch with universal credit for the first time. Those fixes are not in themselves going to solve the problem, as the evidence from CPAG and Citizens Advice Scotland confirms. That is why I have asked Ministers to look at making what is now the assessment for an advance the first UC assessment, and making the advance essentially the first payment. If the recipient is shown to need the money at that point, why would the Government deny them that as part of universal credit, rather than financially penalising them for months after? I do not think there would be a major cost implication, other than to shift payments to the front end of the claim instead of further down the line.

Payment of housing costs to landlords is a major issue for both tenants and landlords. My local authority, North Lanarkshire Council, is having serious problems with the inflexibility of the current system on when rent payments are made. That means that I have received loads of cases where council tenants are getting chased for rent arrears, when the delay is in fact caused by the DWP. The DWP has acknowledged that issue, but there is no date for when it will move from a four-weekly to a monthly payment system. I encourage the DWP to work with local authorities and other housing providers to establish a more flexible system that enables them to know for certain when rent is to be paid.

The benefit freeze has already been raised. It is having a major impact on indebtedness as part of universal credit. While most working-age benefits have been frozen for four years, living costs have risen sharply with higher than anticipated levels of inflation. There is not an expectation that the freeze will continue beyond this financial year, but the Treasury is going to more than recoup its estimated savings from the policy this year. Quite frankly, low-income families have paid more than their fair share towards this Government's policies and the benefit freeze should have ended this year. What estimate have the Government made of the impact that their benefit freeze has had on low-income families and poverty levels? What other detrimental impacts has it had?

Direct deduction rates must be looked at again. The hon. Member for High Peak was right to focus on that issue. If only DWP policy were to match that of the Cabinet Office, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West said, which advocates fairness in

[Neil Gray]

debt collection and an understanding of the impact that debt collection processes have on people. As the hon. Member for High Peak said, that could start with the DWP understanding what debt repayments are actually for, so as to better understand the circumstances that the DWP Ministers should have a duty of care to support.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend not think it absolutely shocking that if a terminal patient accrues debt, that passes on to their family? People should be defined by their medical definition and not the arbitrary six months that exists at the moment.

Neil Gray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of course, she will know that a different system is being created for that in Scotland. I ask the Minister to look at the definition of terminal illness that has been adopted by the Scottish social security agency, which I think would help to deal with some of these problems.

Currently, deductions for indebtedness can be up to 40% of the standard allowance, and the Government are looking to reduce that to 30%. If we accept that the standard allowance is barely enough for anyone to live on in the first place—figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation show that adults without children on UC receive only 40% of the minimum income standard, while adults with children get just 60%—reducing that by a third is just going to exacerbate indebtedness. Most people would struggle if their income was reduced by a third without warning or negotiation, but I also acknowledge that there is a debt, so some effort must be made to repay it. There should be an affordability test and discussions in advance of a deduction being applied, and the recipient should be afforded expert advice and advocacy during that process. That surely has to happen if the DWP is going to give people help and breathing space for indebtedness.

As part of the summer pilot, the Government should consult extensively with key stakeholders, the devolved Governments and the expert charities, and those in receipt of universal credit themselves, particularly disabled people, to make sure that the system is got right and that no one is further impoverished as a result of universal credit.

Speakers from across the House have demonstrated in this debate, once again, that universal credit is still not working. It is time for the Government to listen, to restore and expand the funding available to universal credit and to fix the inbuilt technical issues and flaws that have been raised today and previously, which are contributing to a rise in food bank use and the impoverishment of those both in and out of work.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I call Mike Amesbury.

3.49 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Henry; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

[JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

James Gray (in the Chair): Well, it was—very briefly.

Mike Amesbury: Very briefly.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this vital debate on universal credit, and for all that she does. The debate's importance has been powerfully illustrated by the presence of 26 Members in this Chamber.

As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, universal credit was supposedly designed to be the flagship policy of a reformed welfare system that would protect the most vulnerable in our society, support people into work and act as a safety net for those who needed it most. However, as hon. Members' speeches today have shown, the experience for hundreds of thousands of our constituents has been chaos and hardship, sometimes resulting in tragic circumstances.

What was once hailed as a simplified, holistic and supportive social security reform has become nothing more than a vehicle for cuts. The political choice of austerity has taken more than £37 billion from the welfare state, while giving more than £110 billion of tax cuts to the wealthiest individuals and rich corporations. While the Chancellor looks around and claims to be blind to the poverty that many of us witnessed as we walked into Westminster this morning, the record 1.6 million emergency food parcels that were given out last year alone and the 4.1 million children who are in poverty tell a different story—one that should shame every single one of us in this House.

Riverside, a major social housing provider nationally and in my constituency, has provided me with a case study that illustrates the systemic failure of universal credit on the frontline. The couple involved, who do not wish to give their names because of the sensitive circumstances, said:

"Me and my partner have had so much Universal Credit taken off us, that we are struggling to get gas, electric and food, on a monthly basis, we have tried weekly and that was even worse, the money that we are on makes having a home difficult...so we are having to visit the food bank more regularly."

That is just one among many cases that have been highlighted in this Chamber today. The changes and cuts to the local housing allowance have helped to drive rent arrears up to alarming levels. According to Shelter, two in five renters in the private sector are having to borrow money. Minister, that needs to change.

It would be easy for the Government to try to dismiss such cases and statistics as cherry-picking from Opposition MPs; in fact, a previous Secretary of State referred to them as "fake news". But what about the findings of the United Nations rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, who last month published his third and perhaps most damning view of the Government's welfare policies, stating that our country's poorest residents face lives that are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"? What about the independent End Child Poverty coalition's finding that child poverty is the "new normal" in some of the most deprived parts of Britain, with half a million more children living in poverty now than in 2010?

The Trussell Trust has found that when universal credit goes live in an area, food bank demand increases by a massive 52%. The trust's figures show that a fifth of all referrals to food banks last year were linked to delays in receiving benefits, almost half of which related directly to universal credit. The Minister will claim that advance payments are available to universal credit claimants, so

no one should go hungry for lack of cash. However, it has rightly been pointed out in this debate that those are loans that have to be paid back, which means debt on top of debt for the 60% of claimants who are forced down that route.

The five-week delay in payments must end. The system must be reformed. Will the Minister listen to the plethora of organisations that hon. Members have cited today, such as Shelter, Mind, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Riverside housing association? The monthly payments design of universal credit does not reflect the reality of many people's lives or how they manage their money. A Resolution Foundation study found that most people moving from employment were paid either fortnightly or weekly in their previous job. The research highlighted the fact that people who claim universal credit are often not made aware of alternative payment arrangements to help people who are struggling to manage their own money, and do not always receive them when they apply.

In January, the Secretary of State announced her intention to improve the provision of alternative payment arrangements, make it easier for private renters to have payments made directly to landlords, and test ways to make more frequent payments to more people who struggle with monthly budgeting. Will the Minister tell us what progress has been made on that?

As we have heard today, it is not just advance payments that can lead to deductions from universal credit, but other bills too. Indeed, up to 40% of the universal credit monthly standard allowance can currently be deducted for repayment of advances, utility bill debts and rent and council tax arrears. More than half of universal credit claims had a deduction; as my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak pointed out, that is 844,000 people. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of debt repayments on levels of hardship among universal credit claimants?

According to Citizens Advice, a single person over 25 who claims universal credit can see £127 deducted from their benefits every month to repay existing debts. If the Government are determined to help people to manage their debts, why is their own Department making deductions that often push claimants into hardship?

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. In a recent roving surgery, I visited a constituent who was suffering so much with mental health problems that he was unable even to face opening the letters that he received. He therefore did not receive the information about his situation and was subject to severe sanctions and reductions. He could have challenged them because of his situation, but the DWP was unable even to engage with him to assess the risk that he faced. As a result, he was suicidal. It is absolutely shocking what is going on.

Mike Amesbury: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful contribution that shows the need for more compassion and flexibility in the system. It is clear from the evidence and from this debate that initial decisions to apply deductions follow rigid rules and rates and do not include an affordability test. Will the Minister introduce an affordability test for deductions, particularly multiple deductions, to ensure that nobody is pushed into poverty or destitution?

The Government's stock response to criticism of their welfare policies is to deny that there is even a problem, but their talk of a jobs miracle is nothing more than a mirage to many people who struggle on zero-hours contracts or in low-paid and part-time employment, with wages not even at 2008 levels. The same attitude is on display again in the new "Universal credit uncovered" propaganda campaign, with newspaper ads—seemingly designed to look like journalism—that aim to explode what are perceived to be media myths about universal credit and set the record straight, as my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) pointed out. It is perhaps telling that one charity has already reported the campaign to the Advertising Standards Authority. As we have heard today, these are not myths. They are facts, which illustrate a social security system that is failing—a system hollowed out by cruel cuts.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister to halt managed migration in its entirety, end the five-week wait, stop punitive sanctions, introduce split payments, restore the local housing allowance to at least the bottom 30th percentile, pay 85% of childcare support up front, stop the benefits freeze and the immoral two-child limit, and properly fund a compassionate social security system.

4 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, in this very important debate secured by the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George). Whatever our political differences, I am happy to acknowledge that she and indeed all the hon. Members who have spoken care very deeply about their constituents. I want to be clear that I want to ensure that every single person who is claiming universal credit gets the support that they absolutely deserve.

Let me start by setting out where we are with universal credit. Last year, universal credit completed its roll-out to all jobcentres across the country. We now have just under 2 million people claiming this benefit, and all new entrants to the benefits system now claim universal credit.

I entirely agree that we must ensure that we provide support through the welfare system to the most vulnerable. I am pleased that colleagues from all parties, including the hon. Member for High Peak, have acknowledged that changes have been made. My hon. Friends the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and for Gloucester (Richard Graham), talked about the fabulous work being done by work coaches in our jobcentres.

As colleagues will know, in the last two Budgets, we announced changes to universal credit worth an additional £6 billion. I do not like to introduce rancour into this type of debate, and I am always open to discussion, but I gently point out that on those occasions, Opposition Members did not vote to support that extra money going into the system.

In the 2017 Budget, we announced a two-week run-on for those on housing benefit, the removal of the seven-day waiting period, and the ability for a claimant to get up to 100% of their estimated first-period payment as an advance, on the same day if needed. In last year's Budget, among other measures, we announced increases to work allowances worth £1.7 billion a year. Colleagues touched on the additional run-on; from July 2020, there

[Alok Sharma]

will be a two-week run-on of Department for Work and Pensions out-of-work legacy benefits for existing claimants who are being moved on to universal credit.

Neil Gray: The Minister lists the changes that have been made of late; does he acknowledge that none of them make up for the cuts made in the 2015 Budget?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman will know that we inherited dire financial circumstances from the Opposition—I know that colleagues will not be happy at my mentioning that—and that is why we had to make difficult decisions. However, if Labour Members want more money introduced, then when that money is made available in Budgets, they should support those Budgets.

I will go back to the point about payments, including advance payments. I highlight that advances are interest-free.

Debbie Abrahams: Oh!

Alok Sharma: I am sorry that the hon. Lady is unhappy, but that is a statement of fact.

Debbie Abrahams: They are still loans.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order.

Alok Sharma: Also, individuals will receive that money as an advance to their universal credit payment, so they will receive 13 payments over a 12-month period. I make it absolutely clear once again that, as I hope colleagues will acknowledge, these are interest-free advances. Of course, from October this year, the Government will reduce the maximum rate—

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will not, as there is quite a lot to get through.

From this October, the Government will reduce the maximum rate at which deductions can be made from a universal credit award from 40% to 30% of the standard allowance. By the end of 2019-20, it is forecast that around 290,000 universal credit households will have had deductions reduced, by an average of £295 over the year. It is already possible to extend the period over which advances are repaid to 15 months in certain circumstances, and of course, as Members have acknowledged, from October 2021, the maximum period will be extended to 16 months for all claimants.

One issue not touched on in the debate was payment timeliness, but it is worth pointing out that it has been raised in previous debates, certainly during my time as a Minister. Payment timeliness has improved significantly. We now pay around 85% of new claimants of universal credit in full on time. In addition, 95% of claimants are paid in full within five weeks of their payment due date. If there are delays in making the first payment, that can be due to outstanding verification issues, such as the need to provide bank statements or proof of rent. It can also be due to a claimant not signing their claimant commitment. For ongoing claims, payment timeliness is around 98%.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), raised the issue of employment. The whole point of simplifying the welfare system is to remove the cliff edges and the disincentives to take on work and extra hours that existed under the legacy benefit system. We now offer claimants one-to-one support to help them to move into work.

I hope that colleagues will acknowledge that we are seeing record rates of employment, month after month. The shadow Minister talked about zero-hours contracts, but he will know that less than 3% of people in employment in the UK are on zero-hours contracts. That figure has fallen this year. Indeed, those on zero-hours contracts are doing about 24 hours of work a week on average.

We have recognised that we need to provide a consistently high level of support to those who may have difficulties in making a universal credit claim. That is why we announced our partnership with Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland, which are now funded to provide the “help to claim” service for claimants.

In the past, a number of colleagues have spoken about debt advice. They will know that debt advice is now fully funded by the financial services levy, and that service delivery is commissioned by the Money and Pensions Service, which was launched in January this year. In 2019-20, MaPS will provide around 560,000 sessions of debt advice in England. It is also worth noting that in addition to the funding that Citizens Advice receives for the “help to claim” service, it will, like other organisations, receive additional funding from MaPS to provide debt advice.

A number of colleagues raised the issue of rent arrears. I point out that a report published in July 2018 by the National Federation of ALMOs, or arms-length management organisations, showed that over three quarters of their tenants who had started claiming universal credit were already behind with their rent prior to commencing their claim. Also, research that we have carried out shows that the proportion of universal credit claimants who were in arrears at the start of their claim fell by a third after four months. In the universal credit full service claimant survey, which was published by the DWP in June 2018, 84% of claimants said that they felt confident about managing and paying their housing costs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester raised the issue of rent arrears and asked what further work we were doing on it. I can confirm that we are carrying out further analysis with a number of housing providers to investigate and understand the true level of rent arrears among their tenants, and what is causing those arrears. Of course, when we have that information, we will publish it.

A number of colleagues raised the issue of tax credit debt. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs already seeks to recover overpayments of tax credit debts. When a claimant moves on to universal credit, any outstanding debt is transferred to the DWP for recovery. This does not include debt that is subject to ongoing disputes or appeals, and HMRC tells the claimant the amount of debt that is being transferred to the DWP for recovery. HMRC and the DWP continue to work closely to improve the claimant journey. This includes having a joint inquiry team to handle any issues that tax credit customers might experience during their move to universal

credit. Of course, if claimants are struggling with the rate of repayment applied, they can ask the Department to review that rate.

A large number of points were made during the debate, so I say to hon. Members that if they want to meet me separately to discuss any points in more detail, I am very happy to do that, or they can write to me. However, in the remaining couple of minutes that I have, I will try to cover off some of the points made in the debate.

On the discussion about poverty, I point out that income inequality and absolute poverty are lower now than in 2010, and indeed the number of children—

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will not, because I literally have just a couple of minutes left. As I was saying, the number of children in workless households in the UK is down by 665,000 since 2010.

There was a discussion about homelessness. Since 2011, the Government have provided local authorities with about £1 billion in discretionary housing payments to protect the most vulnerable claimants. The hon. Member for High Peak raised the issue of how people know what deductions are being applied to them; that is shown in their statement, separately from the journal, and is available online. She also raised a point about deductions. I point out that if a claimant is subject to deductions to repay an overpayment, and those deductions are causing financial hardship, they can request a review of that rate by contacting the Department. Claimants have had their repayment rate lowered, temporarily suspended, or indeed both.

A number of colleagues also asked why we were not able to bring forward the 30% deduction rate on the standard allowance. The delivery date was chosen to achieve the best balance between continually improving universal credit in order to respond to claimant needs, and ensuring that the service is technically and operationally scalable as the volume of universal credit continues to

rise. The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) raised an issue about the breathing space scheme; the Department is supportive of that scheme, and officials are reviewing it to see how it could be applied to DWP debts. I would be very happy to sit down and talk with her further when more information is available.

A number of colleagues, including the shadow Minister, raised the issue of the *Metro* campaign. The whole point of the “Universal Credit Uncovered” campaign is to tackle common myths about universal credit. The Department has consulted the Advertising Standards Authority, and our adverts reflect its advice. To those Members who talked about the amount of money being spent on this campaign, I advise them that it is certainly not £23 million.

The issue of split payments was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney; as he knows, those are already available. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) raised the issue of Highland Council. He and I have met a number of times about this issue, and as he will know, my officials continue to engage with Highland Council about that point. Finally, the Scottish Government have themselves cut funding for Highland Council.

In conclusion, we are making changes that are benefiting claimants, but I am always happy to talk to colleagues about how we can do better.

4.12 pm

Ruth George: I called on the Minister to bring forward some of the changes. I do not know whether he understood the waffle that his Department gave him to explain why that will not happen, but I would be very grateful to hear his proper explanation for it.

I thank everyone who has contributed, and the organisations for all their research and briefing. To anyone who is watching who is suffering under universal credit and the deductions that are being made, I say this: get advice, challenge those deductions, and come and see your MP about them. Let us get them sorted.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10 (6)).

Authorised Absence from School

James Gray (in the Chair): Would Members leave the Chamber as quickly and quietly as they can, avoiding private conversations if at all possible? The level of interest in the absence from school debate is proved by the absence of Members from the Chamber.

4.13 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered authorised absence from school.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

I have raised this issue with the Minister many times, both in debates and directly. I have campaigned for the Government to review and change their policy for some time. I remain of the view that it is not the role of the state to dictate to parents what is right and best for their children; that should be decided in partnership between parents and the school. I wanted to raise the issue again today in the light of a number of recent developments and cases that have been brought to me, both by constituents and by parents elsewhere in the country.

Part of the problem is that although the Government say that absence from school should be authorised by headteachers only in exceptional circumstances, they do not provide clear guidance as to what constitutes an exceptional circumstance. That has led to a degree of confusion and complicated situations, as was highlighted recently by the climate change protests, during which thousands of schoolchildren took time away from school to attend the demonstrations. I am reliably informed—it has been reported—that many of those children were given authorised absence to miss classroom time in order to attend those protests. Leaving aside the point that I do not see how something can be called a strike when people have been given permission to be absent, parents should be able to expect some consistency in the application of the policy.

I do not have a problem with children missing time from the classroom to attend those demonstrations. Education is about far more than what takes place in our classrooms, and attending such events broadens children's experiences and knowledge and gives them a wider view of the world, so it is incredibly beneficial to their education. However, I need to challenge the inconsistency. Headteachers have granted leave for children to attend those demonstrations, yet in many other cases that I am aware of, parents have requested authorised leave from school from headteachers for what most reasonable people would consider to be equally good reasons and have been denied.

I know of children who had been selected to compete at international level in their sport, yet their school refused to grant them leave to go and represent their country. I know of one child whose parent requested one day off school—the day before the school broke up for Christmas—so that he could fly to see his father who he had not seen for a year, yet the school refused that request for leave. There seems to be huge inconsistency in applying the rules, and I do not believe it should simply be down to headteachers to determine for which events or experiences it is appropriate for children to

miss school. Making that decision should primarily be the responsibility of parents, in conjunction with the school.

The current policy came in in 2013. It was brought in through a statutory instrument and no impact assessment was carried out. As I have said many times to the Minister, the lack of an impact assessment was an oversight or a mistake by the Government. Until that time, a common-sense approach allowed headteachers discretion to decide when it was appropriate for children to be given leave to be absent from school for a number of reasons. I still argue that headteachers should be given that discretion, because they know the pupils, the families, the communities that they are part of, and the particular pressures and challenges that such a community might face. They are therefore best placed to make the decision in conjunction with the parents, rather than be dictated to centrally.

The rules are applied inconsistently across the UK. Fines are not imposed in Scotland or Northern Ireland, and even though fines are imposed in Wales, a report commissioned by the Welsh Government showed that they are not working. The number of unauthorised absences has gone up since 2013, particularly for family holidays, so the rules have not reduced the level of unauthorised absence in the way that was expected.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has secured this debate on an extremely important subject. At Timothy Hackworth School in my constituency, there are real worries that if it falls below 96% attendance, because a contagious disease or another perfectly valid reason pushes the number of absences up, Ofsted will mark it down. Will the Minister address the question of whether Ofsted is so inflexible that every school has to achieve 96%, irrespective of circumstance?

Steve Double: I am grateful for that intervention. I will probably elaborate further on the hon. Lady's point, but she is absolutely right that the drive to attain an attendance level above everything else, with no recognition of the welfare of the children involved, seems to be overriding common sense. One headteacher told me recently in a meeting, "If our school was outstanding in every other respect, but we fell short of the attendance target, we would be deemed as 'requires improvement' simply for missing the attendance target." That situation seems bonkers to me. Rather than looking at the wider picture of what is right and best for our children, schools are being driven by the Ofsted inspection regime to focus on an attendance target above all else. I will cite a few examples showing how that has been detrimental to the wellbeing and welfare of children and families in our communities.

We now have a situation where parents who for perfectly legitimate reasons are unable to take a family holiday during the school holiday period are basically subject to an arbitrary tax imposed by the local authority for taking their children out of school. Is the Minister's Department aware of how local authorities are spending that money? As far as I can see, literally tens of thousands of pounds is being collected by local authorities through these fines, yet no one seems to know how that money is spent. It would be reasonable for parents to know how the extra tax they are paying is being spent.

For many families, the fines are no deterrent, because they are less than the money they save by taking their children on holiday during term time. If having a cheaper holiday is their motivation, facing a fine is not a deterrent. What it does do is penalise the poorest families in our society. It is a regressive tax. In my constituency, many simply cannot afford a holiday in peak season. We are saying to those poorer families, “Because you cannot afford it, you cannot have a holiday unless you face this additional fine.” It is a regressive situation.

Additionally, the fine hits small business owners the hardest. I have many small business owners in my constituency, particularly in the tourism industry, who are simply unable to take time away from their business during the peak season. That is where they make their money. They are faced with either taking their children on holiday out of peak season when business is quieter and they can afford to have a week away, or not having a family holiday. I say respectfully to the Minister that any policy that hits the entrepreneurs and small business owners of our country in particular should have no place under a Conservative Government. We are targeting the very people we say we stand up for.

A key point that I want to make is that the policy is clearly incredibly unpopular with parents. I am grateful to the parliamentary digital engagement team, which put out some public engagement on social media ahead of the debate. We have seen literally tens of thousands of responses. Mumsnet posted it, and it was the post that attracted the most attention in the whole month of May.

Many parents clearly feel strongly about the policy, but my key point is that it damages the relationship between parents—the family—and the school. It pits one against the other. I was a school governor for 19 years. Sadly, I had to step away from that when I was elected to the House, as I simply did not have time to do it any longer, but I know from that time that at the heart of good education is a partnership between the home and the school. We have got to get away from the concept that education takes place only in the classroom. Education is about the whole of life, and parents have a crucial and central role to play in any child’s education. When that works well, it works in partnership with the school.

Time and again, I have seen this policy break that constructive and positive relationship between parents and the school. Constituents have told me that, because the school refused to give them authorised leave and they were then fined, they refuse to fundraise for the school or volunteer to support it. The policy is counterproductive. We should be encouraging positive relationships between parents and schools, but our policy is damaging that relationship. Whatever gains the Department for Education may feel it is making in education by getting children to be in the classroom more often, I would suggest we are losing out from the loss of good will between parents and the school, and the breakdown of that positive relationship.

Helen Goodman: Perhaps I can trespass for another couple of seconds on the hon. Gentleman to say that he is absolutely right. Furthermore, we see rising mental health problems among children and young people, and this kind of stress is exactly what families do not need.

Steve Double: I think the hon. Lady has read my notes; I am slightly worried. The next point I wanted to raise was that one of the unintended consequences—I do not believe anyone in the ministerial team or the Department for Education intends it—is the impact the policy is having on some of the most vulnerable children, including those with special needs and particularly those with mental health challenges. Several parents from my constituency have come to see me because they are at their wits’ end. Their children have severe mental health challenges, yet the school will not authorise them to miss any time off school, when they are not able to attend school regularly because of the mental health challenges they face.

In one case the school said, “We will not authorise your leave until you have a diagnosis for your child,” but we all know that it takes months and months to get a mental health diagnosis for young people. Parents are getting warning letters from the school because their child is missing school, even though it knows that the child has mental health conditions. All that does is aggravate the issue for the child and the parents.

The way the policy is being driven by Ofsted and some of our schools is incredibly detrimental to the wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable children in our communities. I therefore believe that we need to take a serious, long look at the policy. The policy is putting schools and headteachers in an impossible situation. The drive to raise attendance levels above all else is having an incredibly detrimental impact on some families and children.

Part of the problem—this was alluded to earlier by the hon. Lady—is that there is a sense of buck-passing. The DFE says that heads have discretion to exercise their judgment on what is an exceptional circumstance, but headteachers tell me that when they exercise that discretion—correctly, they believe—if the attendance level drops, they are criticised and marked down by Ofsted. When I meet Ofsted staff and challenge them, they tell me that they are only doing what they are instructed to do by the DFE.

There seems to be a vicious circle that no one can break out of. We need to be clear about whether headteachers have discretion to exercise their judgment. If they do, they need to be allowed to do so and not be criticised by Ofsted. If taking discretion away from headteachers is a clear policy being driven from the centre, let us be honest about that so that the headteachers are not put in an impossible situation.

Before winding up, I want to mention the impact on the holiday market and holiday businesses. Many firms get criticised for raising their prices during the peak holiday season, which is basically the school holidays, but the reality is—I have literally hundreds of such businesses in my constituency—that that is now the only time of the year in which they get to make money. Parents are prevented from bringing their children outside the holiday season, so all that demand gets condensed into six or seven weeks in the summer season, and that is when those businesses have to make their money. We cannot blame them. If the demand is there, and they need to make their money in those few short weeks, clearly prices will go up. However, we are exacerbating the issue through this policy. By making the demand so condensed in those few weeks, we are making holidays

[*Steve Double*]

even more unaffordable for many families, so they have to choose to take their holiday at another time. It is another case of the policy being counterproductive.

I have many examples. When word went out that I had secured this debate, literally thousands of people across the country contacted me with examples of how the policy is negatively affecting their family and children. I do not have time to read many of them, but there are many cases of families struggling to live with the consequences of the policy.

I do not think that the policy is working, and we are not achieving what we actually want to, which is better outcomes for children. We have to take a wider view and understand that education is about more than the classroom. The policy is counterproductive, because it damages the vital, constructive, positive relationship between families and schools, and it hits some of the most vulnerable in our society. Once again, I put it to the Minister that we really need to review the policy and consider a better way of applying the right sort of expectations on parents with regard to having their children in school regularly. We must ensure that we are not damaging children and families as a result of the policy, and look at whether there is a better way of doing this.

4.31 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing the debate. I know that this subject is of close interest to him. As he mentioned, it is one that we have debated on a number of occasions over the years.

We can all agree that children's education should not be disrupted by preventable absences. Regular attendance at school is fundamental to ensuring that every pupil, no matter their background, can meet their full potential. It is about social mobility. That is why I welcome this opportunity to reiterate the Government's commitment to improving school attendance and ensuring that schools tackle all forms of absence as part of our ambition to create a world-class education system. I will set out the Government's overall policy on reducing school absence before turning to the issue of term-time holidays.

There is a correlation between time absent from school and attainment. Pupils with higher overall absence tend to do less well in their GCSEs, even after taking their prior attainment and some other characteristics into account, as set out in the report by the Department for Education, "Absence and attainment at key stages 2 and 4: 2013 to 2014". A pupil who has been absent is also liable to interrupt the education of other pupils and to increase the workload on teachers, as schools seek to ensure that an absent pupil catches up with the work that he or she has missed.

The Government have made the rules clear: no child should be taken out of school without good reason. We have put headteachers back in control by supporting them, and local authorities, to use their powers to deal with absence. We secured changes to the Education (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2006, to which my hon. Friend referred, to reduce overall absence.

The persistent absence threshold was changed from 15% to 10% in September 2015 to encourage schools to act earlier in dealing with patterns of poor attendance. Persistent absence from school remains a society-wide challenge. We recognise the need for further action in this area, following a small but consistent increase in the number of pupils missing 10% or more of sessions in recent years; that figure is up from 10.8% in 2016-17 to 11.2% in 2017-18.

In 2013, we also clarified the law to address the widespread misconception that parents were entitled to take their children on holiday during term time. No such entitlement has ever existed in law. In clarifying the law, the Government ensured that headteachers retained the discretion to authorise a leave of absence when they were confident that the request constituted an exceptional circumstance. The Department has not specified to schools what constitutes exceptional circumstances. Schools know their pupils better than the Department, and can consider the specific details and relevant context behind each request for a leave of absence.

My hon. Friend will agree that what constitutes exceptional circumstances will differ enormously depending on individual and local circumstances. That is why it would not be appropriate for the Government to dictate what exceptional circumstances would warrant authorised absence across the country. We are clear that children should not be absent from school unless the circumstances are genuinely exceptional.

I agree with my hon. Friend that a positive and constructive relationship between parents and schools is essential. That is why we encourage parents to talk to their child's school to make their case when they require a leave of absence. If parents wish to take their child out of school, the onus is on them to apply to the school in advance for a leave of absence, demonstrating in their application why they believe that there are exceptional circumstances.

I disagree with my hon. Friend that the Department's attendance policy is counterproductive. Despite a very small increase in overall absence from 4.7% in 2016-17 to 4.8% in 2017-18, overall absence has fallen significantly from 6% in 2009-10. Parents have a duty, under section 7 of the Education Act 1996, to ensure that if their child is of compulsory school age—five to 16—he or she receives an

"efficient full-time education...either by attendance at school or otherwise".

We have ensured that schools and local authorities have a range of measures to support or sanction parents when their child's absence from school becomes a problem. The law gives schools and local authorities powers to offer parenting contracts and obtain parenting orders in relation to attendance. The law is clear that if parents register their child at a school and the child fails to attend regularly, parents may be guilty of an offence under section 444 of the 1996 Act, and may be given a penalty notice unless statutory exceptions apply, including where leave has been granted by the headteacher.

The penalty notice offers parents the opportunity to avoid any conviction for the offence, if the penalty is paid in full and within the timescales. Prosecution of a parent is available to local authorities as the ultimate sanction under section 444 of the 1996 Act. Penalties are therefore a way of avoiding prosecution, although of course local authorities can go straight for a prosecution.

Since we last debated the issue, the Supreme Court has clarified that regular attendance in section 444(1) of the 1996 Act means attendance

“in accordance with attendance rules”.

The Court also recognised the disruptive effect of taking a child out of school during term time, both on the child and on the work and study of the other children at the school and in the class.

Turning to my hon. Friend’s point about term-time holidays, the Government recognise the value of family holidays in providing enriching experiences that can indeed have educational value. However, the school year is designed to give families the opportunity to enjoy breaks and holidays without disrupting their children’s education. Schools are in session for 190 out of 365 days, leaving 175 days in a year on which parents can take their children away on holiday. I recognise that the cost of holidays is a frustration for parents, and the Secretary of State and I encourage travel operators to do what they can to provide value for money to families.

The Government do not set term and holiday dates. Decisions around term dates are best taken locally, especially where the local industry—for example, tourism—creates a compelling reason to set term dates that differ from those of the rest of the country. Local authorities are responsible for setting term dates for community schools, community special schools, and voluntary-controlled schools.

Variation in school holiday dates between local authorities already exists. That was seen over the recent Easter holidays. Sheffield City Council, for example, has a fixed Easter break at the beginning of April, which this year fell outside the official Easter peak. Similarly, in 2017, Nottinghamshire County Council took the decision to shorten its summer break and extend its October half term to two weeks, following consultation with parents.

All academies and free schools, which account for about 36% of state-funded schools, have responsibility for setting their term and holiday dates. Other schools, where the governing body is the employer of staff, such as foundation or voluntary-aided schools, also have that power, which some have already used to adapt their term dates to suit the needs of their pupils and local areas. That is an important freedom that the Government

have encouraged schools to use. If parents and schools want different term dates, so they can take their children on holidays outside the more expensive peak holiday season, they should discuss that with their local authority, or with their child’s school, if it is a foundation, voluntary-aided school or academy.

Helen Goodman: Will the Minister address the question of whether Ofsted is failing schools if attendance is below 96%? If 96% is the wrong number, will he tell us the right one?

Nick Gibb: I am about to come on to Ofsted, which was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, and its role in influencing schools’ decisions.

Ofsted’s inspection framework makes it clear that it will consider an up-to-date attendance analysis for all groups of pupils. Inspectors will make a judgment about the behaviour and attitudes in a school. The inspection framework specifies that in doing so, they will look for a strong focus on attendance and punctuality, so that disruption is minimised. They will expect to see clear and effective behaviour and attendance policies, with clearly defined consequences that are applied consistently and fairly by all staff. They will also consider how well the school meets the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, and pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend and other hon. Members for highlighting the issues around school attendance. To answer my hon. Friend’s question about how the money is spent, the requirement is for it to be reinvested in the attendance system in the local area. The system is intended to be cost-neutral. Many areas spend it on supporting projects to improve school attendance locally.¹

The Government take the issue seriously and have put in place a number of measures to prioritise and incentivise school attendance. We will continue to monitor progress and encourage schools and local authorities to use their powers to stagger term dates where appropriate.

Question put and agreed to.

1. [Official Report, 10 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 3MC.]

Crime and Antisocial Behaviour: Small Towns

4.42 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rising crime and antisocial behaviour in smaller towns and communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and I thank hon. Members for coming to this important debate. I am grateful to have the opportunity to hold the debate, because crime is one of the most important issues that my constituents face.

My constituency is a collection of small towns and villages perched just outside Leeds in West Yorkshire. As such, we fall under the responsibility of West Yorkshire police, which covers an enormous area—more than 2,000 sq km—that is home to upwards of 2 million people. Its jurisdiction includes the big cities of Leeds and Bradford and the large towns of Wakefield and Huddersfield. With those big bustling urban centres, it can often feel like a competition for the smaller places that I represent, such as Batley, Birstall, Liversedge, Gomersal, Heckmondwike and Cleckheaton, to get the attention they deserve.

There is a perception that the serious crime happens in big cities, but that could not be further from the truth, which is why this debate focuses specifically on towns and smaller communities. I will use examples from my constituency to demonstrate my concerns. Before that, however, it is important to put the cuts that have been forced on West Yorkshire police on the record. Since 2010, it has lost £140 million in central Government funding and more than 1,000 officers.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that it is often the low-level antisocial behaviour that is an absolute blight on neighbourhoods? The police have so many competing demands, largely because of the reduction in their numbers, that it is difficult for them to respond to everything that they might like to.

Tracy Brabin: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting antisocial behaviour, which I will come to. The cuts certainly have an impact on our streets.

The funding cuts to West Yorkshire police would be worse were it not for the action of the Labour police and crime commissioner, Mark Burns-Williamson, who raised the police funding element of council tax to stem the loss of officers and restart recruitment in the face of cuts to the central grant. I am not a spokesperson for the police, and, let us be honest, many people in my constituency are frustrated with police services, but it is important to acknowledge the context of what they have faced in recent years, because it has an impact on their ability to respond to and deter crime.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): As a fellow West Yorkshire MP, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I strongly agree that West Yorkshire police has faced major cuts, which are hitting our towns. Does she agree that towns have often been particularly heavily hit by austerity, because

overstretched police forces have been forced to concentrate many of their resources in the bigger cities? In Knottingley, there have been recent reports and challenges regarding antisocial behaviour, and in Normanton, there have been attacks on shopkeepers in the town centre. We need neighbourhood police officers in our towns, as well as the crime prevention work, to keep people safe.

Tracy Brabin: My right hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. We need the community presence, as well as the intelligence that comes from relationships with communities. That can stem the flow of antisocial behaviour, because the police know where it is coming from and because they know the families.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is also important to appreciate that police community support officers—an excellent Labour initiative that contributed to neighbourhood policing while Labour was in power—have faced reductions too. The decline in their number is important, and the reduction in Wrexham town centre is having a noticeable impact on antisocial behaviour.

Tracy Brabin: That is an excellent point. I pay tribute to those officers who are increasingly asked to go beyond the call of duty and attend what are sometimes quite violent situations that they may not have the resources at hand to deal with.

It is not an exaggeration to say that there is a crime epidemic in my constituency, which my constituents are sick to the back teeth of. I, too, am completely fed up and exhausted from hearing from constituents who are at their wits' end and frightened to leave home after dark because of the menace of nuisance bikes and mopeds.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): It is commendable that my hon. Friend has brought this debate to Westminster Hall. I also commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for her work on towns. Like many hon. Members, I have two towns in my constituency. People feel not just a sense of loss, but fear and worry when there is no visible police station. Great Harwood and Haslingden in my constituency have lost their police stations, for the reason that my right hon. Friend stated—the cuts take place in the small towns—and criminals can see that there is an opportunity to commit crime, so people live in fear.

Tracy Brabin: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. Certainly, in Batley, the police station has gone up for sale. It is disconcerting for communities when they see that “For sale” sign appear. People wonder, “If I was in a crisis, how long would it take for the police to arrive?”

To return to nuisance bikes and mopeds, the problem goes beyond antisocial behaviour; it is extremely dangerous, not just for the bike owners, but for other road users and pedestrians. The bikes keep people awake at night, which has a serious impact on health, wellbeing, stress and anxiety. It is also a difficult crime to clamp down on, as the perpetrators are on fast-moving vehicles, and most bikes are being used illegally, so simply taking them off the streets is a time-limited hindrance rather than a solution. Equally, we do not necessarily want high-speed chases to happen in built-up areas and little villages.

I am pleased to say, however, that West Yorkshire police and Kirklees Council, working with me, have been able to provide protective equipment for a couple of police motorcycle riders, so that officers can be trained to safely catch those who cause havoc. We know that we need a proper, nationwide response to tackle this problem, rather than piecemeal solutions when an MP gets concerned about something. We know it is going to involve the police, along with schools, youth services and local authority outreach teams. Sadly, those are all things that the Conservatives seem to have no problem cutting.

Let me turn to burglaries. What is happening in my constituency is truly shocking. When I visit the shopping centres in my towns and villages, the frequency of burglaries never fails to shock me. The towns of Batley and Birstall have been particularly badly hit. Burglaries affected almost every shop in Birstall town centre, one after the other. What is most frustrating is that in many cases the crime seems completely brainless—money is not kept on-site and items of high value have been removed. The criminals break in, wreak havoc and usually leave empty-handed. In some cases, they take the charity box. There was a break-in at the Chaiiwala café in Batley. The charity box was taken, and the café reached out on Facebook and said that that person must be very hungry or struggling financially, and that if they contacted the café, it would give them a week's free food and perhaps support them financially. The shop owners should not have to do this to try to solve a problem that is not necessarily of their making. It is almost as if causing damage is for its own sake.

Last Saturday was Small Business Saturday, and I was really taken aback when visiting business owners. One said they were seriously considering leaving their door open, having been a victim of so many break-ins on numerous occasions, given that it is almost cheaper to leave the door open than have it repaired every time they are broken into. I could go on highlighting such cases, but we need solutions. Town centres are struggling enough; they should not have to contend with repeated break-ins.

The reality in smaller towns is that there usually will not be a police car round the corner during late evenings and through the night, and response officers are prioritising urgent cases such as domestic abuse or violence. So what can we do? Can the Minister tell us whether the Government have given consideration to crime prevention measures as part of plans to support high streets? Perhaps central funding could be made available for co-ordinated alarm systems or even high-quality CCTV, which can be too expensive for smaller shops acting on their own. If criminals are to be caught and prosecuted, surely that is the greatest deterrent possible.

I have used a number of case studies, but Members should be in no doubt that the figures more than back them up. I will come to that shortly.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. On actions, the police in my area are concerned that when a person commits an offence on an estate, it is not standard for an injunction to sit alongside the prosecution, banning them from the area and imposing curfews that do not allow them to go out at night. That should be part and parcel of what is meted out to individuals who cause such havoc for businesses and residents in our communities.

Tracy Brabin: That is a very well-made point. By working with Safer Kirklees and Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing, we can have a joined-up effect on the most persistent burglars and try to get them out of those areas. Our communities do not want such behaviour. However, when we move people on, they can always stay with friends or on people's sofas. It is important to ensure they are restricted in their opportunities for criminality, so my right hon. Friend makes a very good point.

I now turn to one of my deepest concerns: violent crime. We have seen an escalation in violent crime in our towns and villages. I recently went to our local pub in Cleckheaton, where a couple had been attacked violently with an axe while the pub was open. Although traumatised, the staff, landlord and landlady have been very brave in continuing to open their pub, and they have been overwhelmed by the community response to support them. A pensioner was also brutally attacked on a popular walkway by a gang of youths. A serving soldier was mowed down while celebrating the new year—luckily, the perpetrator is now behind bars. Guns are being discharged far too often in our community.

West Yorkshire police have recently been judged outstanding for reporting crime, for which I celebrate them. Their website breaks down the figures by parliamentary constituency, and I am afraid that it does not make for happy reading. Between April 2018 and March 2019, 2,686 incidents of antisocial behaviour were reported in Batley and Spen. There were 2,700 incidents of burglary, criminal damage or arson. More disturbingly, there have been almost 4,500 reported incidents of violence and sexual offences. Not a month has gone by when fewer than 1,000 crimes have been reported. This is a constituency of just over 100,000 people. Those numbers are shocking and wrong, and we deserve better. For each of the examples I have given, there are literally hundreds of other cases that people felt too demoralised or jaded even to report. We simply must stop crime continuing to rise.

Batley and Spen sounds a bit like the wild west, but it is a wonderful place to live and work. We cannot allow our lives to be blighted by the minority.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she think that, at the very heart of this, the concern of people in constituencies such as Batley and Spen and Great Grimsby is that quality of life is severely affected as a result of crime, be it violent crime, which has increased in my constituency, or the antisocial behaviour that she has been discussing?

Tracy Brabin: I absolutely agree. In comparison with cities, the quality of life in some towns is being diminished because services are going out to cities—infrastructure and so on. We should not have to put up with the increase in violent crime and antisocial behaviour in nice backwaters; we should have a proper quality of life and choose to live in communities such as ours because they are safer, the quality of life is better and they are great places to bring up children.

We have to be frank: the rise in crime is not just about a couple of bad apples, a family or a gang of kids. The Conservatives used to be the party of law and order—they used to pride themselves on it—but they have done their

[Tracy Brabin]

absolute best since 2010 to destroy that reputation. Police-recorded violent crime has more than doubled since 2010. Knife crime is at its highest on record. Arrests—the currency of deterrence—have halved in a decade, and the number of unsolved crimes stands at an unthinkable 2 million cases. Nine years of austerity has led to 20,000 fewer officers on our streets. The National Audit Office estimates that police funding fell by 19% between 2010-11 and 2018-19, and direct Government funding fell by a staggering 30% over the same period.

Police are not the only force for resolving, and preferably deterring, crime—no hon. Members present would argue that they are. However, they provide a vital service. When the police are seen on the streets less or take longer to respond, or when a crime goes unsolved, trust is diminished and fear creeps in.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case about her constituency, which is very similar to mine—a rural area with lots of towns and where crime is rising. Our police have almost halved in number. Our police stations have been shutting, our magistrates court has shut, and now our custody suite is shutting as well. Police officers will have to travel almost an hour to take people who have been arrested into custody. Does she agree that those cuts, and austerity more widely, lead directly to the rise in crime?

Tracy Brabin: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the reduction of police officers on the streets. If an officer has to travel further with a prisoner, they will be tied up for longer and less available to respond to emergency 999 calls. It is a powerful point.

I said at the beginning that there is a crime epidemic in Batley and Spen. I know that that is strong language, but I think my speech has proved that it is justified. I very much look forward to hearing the contributions from other hon. Members and the Minister, so I will not take up too much more time but finish with this. The challenge is that cities, towns and rural areas are often very different, but the ambition should be the same. Crime ruins lives, and citizens should not be blighted by it or live in fear of it. The purpose of this debate is not to say that towns and smaller communities are more important than other places; it is simply to get a better understanding of the issues and to kick-start the debate about the solutions.

Does the Minister have plans to undertake an audit of crime in towns? My office staff and I tried hard to find data about crime in towns compared with cities, and it is not available. Will she and her Government produce a report that shows the difference in the levels of reported crime and crime that has been resolved in towns, compared with cities? We also need a greater understanding of where money is spent. Most police force areas include towns, cities and rural areas. Perhaps the Minister can work with police forces on that and update the House at a later date.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) was not here at the beginning of the debate, so I will not call her. Incidentally,

I do not think that she or her hon. Friends should really have arrived in the middle of the debate and intervened straightaway, not having been here throughout the speech of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin). The hon. Member for High Peak will have to forgive me for mildly ticking her off.

5.1 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this important debate. It is great to have the opportunity to talk about policing and to commend our policemen and women, who do a fantastic job in difficult circumstances. There is no doubt that they face difficulties. We have fewer police and police community support officers, and that has created problems. I remind hon. Members and everyone who is listening that if Labour had not left the finances in such a state, perhaps that would not have happened. [Interruption.] Labour Members can argue about that, but the bottom line is that if the money is not there, we cannot employ the police we need. I have not met a politician on either side of the House who wants fewer police and to make the environment more difficult for them. Difficult decisions had to be made because the money was not there. We have to accept that and work together to make our communities safer.

I meet my police a lot and spend a lot of time with them. It annoys my police and crime commissioner that I have such a close relationship with them. They tell me not just that there is a lack of cash—there certainly is—and that they have lost lots of police officers, although that is certainly the case, but that crime has changed dramatically in the period we are talking about. They have to spend a huge amount of resources on counter-terrorism, even in west Cornwall and the far south-west. Hon. Members might think that it is not an issue there, but people come in through our ports and harbours, and they need to be followed, arrested and dealt with.

The police also say that they are spending a lot of time and money investigating historical sex crime and abuse. We must recognise that this debate is about not just money but attention being needed elsewhere.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as usual. Does he agree that we hear a lot about rurality in this place, but sometimes towns next to large conurbations have resources sucked out of them? Police stations are closing in Solihull, yet resources are going directly to Birmingham all the time. That is sometimes a huge challenge for those towns.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention. I assure my hon. Friend that every person in Cornwall knows that argument. For a long time, including before we came to power, resources have been concentrated in Exeter and Devon, rather than in Cornwall, and that has always been a bone of contention. We have argued strongly that resources are needed right down as far as Penzance and the Isles of Scilly.

There is no doubt that in towns in Cornwall, there has been a rise in crime—sometimes violent crime, but certainly drug-related crime. I have talked about the change in the way that things are happening, and certainly drugs are moving around differently. The Government and the police and crime commissioner have made

resources available, and have concentrated them in areas such as Penzance and elsewhere in Cornwall where people just did not feel safe. Things were going on in broad daylight that would not have gone on in the past. I completely accept that as we reduce numbers and the visibility of the police, other things are allowed to happen, which much be addressed.

Money has been poured in, and we have seen improvements, although there is still lots to do. The key thing is to communicate to the public that they must report every incident they see, even if they sometimes feel that that is not acted upon. The police tell me that the intelligence they collect is really useful in helping them get to the root of the problem, rather than just deal with the individual on the street corner causing a problem.

I pay tribute to Cornwall Council, the safer communities teams and the police in Cornwall for working together effectively over the past 18 months or so to address these problems, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, that has sucked resources from other parts of my constituency. I ask the Minister to consider the audit that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen recommended. As resources have been reduced and focused on areas with particular problems, we have begun to see low but concerning levels of crime, antisocial behaviour, and alcohol and drug misuse in our very small towns, and people are not used to that. I represent a town that was always awarded the title of safest town in the country, but now people come to me because they are concerned about things going on—at night, but also in the daytime—that they are not used to seeing. When that happens, it does not just make life uncomfortable for people, but harms the individuals who are caught up in that behaviour. There are opportunities that were not there before.

I ask the Minister to have a look at what is going on in very small towns where we are seeing problems. She should speak to police chiefs about how they will address that, and about what resources they can be given to put people on the street and to engage with the community. I have hosted meetings in St Ives and Helston with businesses, local communities and the police to talk about how communities and businesses can know when to report stuff, what to report and who they should report it to. It is really important that the police know where their resources are needed.

No one in this Chamber would deny that people deserve to feel safe and live in a place they can feel proud of. When they see concerning levels of antisocial behaviour and drug and alcohol misuse, their feeling of pride and safety is significantly compromised.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman also consider the impact that antisocial behaviour has on local businesses and restaurants? After a stabbing in Mitcham town centre only two weeks ago, the restaurateur of the local Italian restaurant said that his business dropped by 20%. Even though the stabbing was linked to gang issues that were of no consequence to the rest of the community, it made people feel unsafe, and they no longer wanted to go to his restaurant.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention. High streets are in big enough trouble as it is without all this stuff going on. In St Ives and Penzance, people started

to put stuff on Facebook. People who know St Ives will know that it is a massive tourist attraction, as are Helston and the Lizard. I am concerned about what the people putting stuff on Facebook are doing to their local economy by suggesting that those towns are not places to visit. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there is a real impact on the local economy, which we must obviously work to support more effectively.

We do not want our families and children to be confronted by these problems or—dare I say it?—dragged into them. Policing is obviously important, but keeping people safe is about much more than how the police do their job and how visible they are. Will the Minister also look at what can be done to support local initiatives, often in the voluntary sector, that work with the police and the local authorities to nip these issues in the bud, and to support people who would otherwise be drawn into the criminal justice system or engage in behaviour that can be a slippery slope? We have all seen that in families that we represent.

Can the Minister talk to police chiefs about what is going on in rural areas? There is growing concern, and it is absolutely right that we nip the problem in the bud. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the issue; it is the right debate to have. Hopefully, we can work across the House to make our constituencies safer, and to make them places of which we can be proud.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Gray (in the Chair): Hon. Members now have two minutes. I call Mike Hill.

5.9 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Thank you Mr Gray; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this debate.

I confess that Hartlepool is not a small town by any means, but the constituency is made up of small and distinct communities, such as the Headland, and villages, such as Greatham, Newton Bewley, Dalton Piercey, Hart and Elwick. Although we are part of County Durham by nature—Hartlepool is its historic port—we are in reality one of four local authority areas in the Tees valley that are covered by Cleveland police, which is one of the smallest forces in the country.

The Government's austerity agenda means that Cleveland police force has suffered a 37% reduction in its staffing budget since 2010, which has resulted in the loss of 500 frontline officers and a substantial number of police community support officers since then. The net effect of policing cuts on Hartlepool was made clear to the nation when my constituency became the focus of a BBC film that was broadcast on the national news; it brought home the stark reality that in a town of 92,028 at the last count, only 10 police officers were on duty on a Saturday night.

Understandably, the reaction of my constituents was a feeling that streets and communities had been abandoned, and that the film was an advert to criminals, showing them that Hartlepool lay unprotected. To compound that, local police cells had been mothballed because of

[Mike Hill]

budget pressures, meaning a 30-mile round trip to the custody cells in Middlesbrough for officers depositing offenders.

We have just recruited a new chief constable, Richard Lewis. One of his first jobs was to come to Hartlepool to witness for himself the strength of feeling in our communities. Hartlepool and its outlying villages have never been abandoned by the police—far from it. We have one of the best multi-agency crime prevention teams in the area, and a strong neighbourhood policing ethic. Resources are so stretched, however, that there is a distinct lack of bobbies on the beat, and because of increased demands on police officers' time, some of the basics are beginning to suffer. It is sad to say, but the number of incidents that the police have failed or not had the capacity to deal with is increasing, according to my mailbag. That includes break-ins, burglaries, damage to vehicles and even assaults.

Cleveland police force is doing what it can by trying to refocus on emergency calls and increasing the number of special constables in its ranks. It is clear as day, however, that without proper funding, the force is fighting with one arm tied behind its back. For our rural communities—villages in particular—the thinner the blue line is spread, the more difficult it becomes to maintain proportionate policing cover. Rural crime is as much an aspect of life in my constituency as urban crime is in urban areas. This situation simply cannot continue. It is imperative that the Government act now for the good of my constituents.

I will make two points to end my speech. First, single-crew policing, which correlates with crime, presents a threat to individual officers attending violent crime scenes. Secondly, only this week, a 48-year-old man was held down by two men and robbed in broad daylight, at half-past one in the afternoon, outside our local hospital. That is not Hartlepool.

James Gray (in the Chair): My mistake; we have slightly more time than I thought. The Front-Bench speeches will start at 5.22 pm.

5.13 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Gray; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this important debate.

Perhaps more controversially, I would say that most people do not see themselves as living in one city or town. Even within a city, they see themselves as living in towns. In my constituency of Mitcham and Morden, people live in Mitcham. They do not live in the borough of Merton or in London, but in Mitcham. That is the area that they are concerned about.

Although Merton is regarded as the fourth safest borough in London, to people living in Mitcham that does not wash when they see escalating antisocial behaviour in the town centre and how petty crime quickly becomes serious crime if left unchecked. If I have time, I will also talk about the sale of air guns in high street shops and the desperate need for more school police officers.

Mitcham town centre is unfortunately a hotbed of antisocial behaviour in the heart of the suburbs. Unchecked antisocial behaviour is the first step on a very slippery slope to the level of crime that we have heard described in the debate; the gulf between antisocial behaviour and serious crime is not as large as many of us allow ourselves to believe. There are small steps between noise and nuisance, drinking and drunkenness, and inconvenience and illegality.

When such antisocial behaviour goes unchecked, it begins to foster and grow. That is about what becomes normal and acceptable, and what goes unchallenged—for example the drug takers who routinely gather outside my constituent Alberta's backyard in Mitcham, or the street drinking and urinating that has become commonplace in the town centre, or the atmosphere of noise and nuisance that street drinking encourages. All of that often goes unpoliced.

Why does antisocial behaviour go unchecked? It is because we no longer have enough bobbies on the beat to control it. The simple truth is that there is no substitute for a visible police presence in the community. Is it any wonder that Merton alone has lost 90 police officers since 2010, when the Met has been forced to make more than £700 million in cuts in that time, with a further £325 million to be cut by 2021? So much for the end of austerity. The challenge that that depleted force faces is alarming. It simply does not have the support or resources from this Government to challenge the crime that is frightening our streets.

Mrs. B wrote to me to describe how understandably terrified she was when she looked out of her kitchen window and saw a group of young men on bikes with 40-inch machetes. Mr. G wrote to me in horror last month after seeing a man attacked with yet another machete, less than 24 hours after multiple stabbings nearby. He said:

"I'm angry that this has happened where I live and in such a blatant way. I feel sad at how cheap life would seem to these people. And I'm absolutely frustrated with the disintegration of any real responsibility from the state on this issue."

How many more people need to die on our streets? How many more families need to grieve the tragic loss of a loved one? How many warnings need to be given? We simply need more police on our streets.

In the light of the spread of violent crime across our country, we in this Chamber all have a responsibility to ensure that our streets are safe. That is why I am so furious to report that a store in my constituency is selling guns—yes, guns. Cash Exchange is—legally, I must say—selling airguns in my constituency. We do not have rolling fields; we do not have a rural culture. We have airguns masquerading as sub-machine-guns, which are sold to people who want to look intimidating and frightening on our streets, and it is done legally. Why is the display of those weapons permitted by law? Why is their sale not licensed by the police? Why are the Government not taking active steps to ensure our safety? We do not need those guns in shops in suburban south London.

This is not just about our streets, but about our schools. National funding cuts and high vacancy rates have led to the decline of our treasured school police officers. My local headteachers wrote to me describing school police officers as instrumental to building relationships within their school communities, breaking

down the barriers that some families have with the police, and ensuring that more youngsters leave school with a positive view of the police. Sessions and workshops led by officers are important, but they simply do not provide a like-for-like alternative for the school police officer who those youngsters get to know and trust.

Two of the secondary schools in my constituency now share just one school police officer; the other secondary school shares an officer with a school at the other end of the borough. There is a total of just seven officers for Merton's secondary schools and further education college. That is simply not enough. This is not about point scoring but about the safety of our young people. Adequately funding our police force so that school police officers can be retained is essential to ensuring the safety of those young people.

I ask loud and clear: bring back bobbies on the beat; stop the sale of airguns on our high streets; and stop the loss of schools police officers from our secondary schools. The first duty of any Government is to ensure the protection of their citizens. By that measure, the failure of this Government is devastating.

James Gray (in the Chair): There are two minutes for Mr Jim Shannon.

5.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Gray. I also thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for securing the debate and the opportunity for us to participate.

I am conscious that the Minister does not have responsibility for policing or antisocial behaviour in Northern Ireland, but I want to make a contribution to describe what we have done in Northern Ireland and in my constituency in particular. That might add to the debate and help us see how we can move forward.

The issue of antisocial behaviour, of misbehaviour, causes concern. Our force, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, has had its numbers reduced. Rural community policing has not existed since the closures of the village police stations. Some seven have closed over the years—Portaferry, Greyabbey, Donaghadee, Saintfield, Carryduff, Killyleagh and Ballynahinch—with one on the edge of my constituency and the other six in it. No longer is a police officer in a position to take a call, go round to the problem area, lift the children and bring them home to their parents to be dealt with—we simply do not have the police numbers to do that.

Unfortunately, groups of young people can, perhaps inadvertently or unknowingly, cause hassle. Music playing in a field behind someone's house at midnight is not okay, because it affects a mother and her children who are trying to sleep. Throwing cigarettes and matches into a farmer's field in a dry spell might cause a fire. Those are all important issues for many people. To the parents who do not know where their child is or what their child is doing, that should be a concern.

Many people try to address antisocial behaviour by creating church groups in their areas. A local church group runs an event on a Saturday night in Newtownards. That helps for part of the time, but not beyond 10 pm. For years, community workers, the PSNI, the council antisocial behaviour team and street pastors have worked together to build up relations with the children and try

to find a way forward. What really helped make the change, however, was when planning permission was granted for a development in the area they went to, so the misbehaviour did not happen any longer.

Churches and volunteer groups do a tremendous job, but they cannot run half the night, and antisocial behaviour teams are challenged. What is the answer? We have to put in a foundation. That means more bodies—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Sadly, the House will never know what the answer is. It is time to call the first of the Front Benchers.

5.22 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gray, and to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I am sorry he was cut off in his prime.

I thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for securing the debate and for her passionate and eloquent introduction. As she said, we all want to feel safe in our homes and communities. That is as true of constituents living in smaller towns as of those who live anywhere else. It means safety from the full range of offences, from serious violence to antisocial behaviour. As she and other Members have illustrated with some pretty horrifying examples, too many people are impacted by all that. I will briefly set out what the SNP sees as the key strategies for driving down crime and antisocial behaviour.

My starting point is slightly different, because in Scotland, thankfully, we have continued to see a significant and sustained fall in crime over the past decade. Yesterday, for example, we saw analysis showing that attempted murders and serious assaults are down by about 38% on 10 years ago. We have also seen a long-term sustained reduction in experiences and perceptions of antisocial behaviour. I pay tribute to and thank all who have been involved in setting that downward trajectory. None of that is to say that there will not be bumps along the way, that the trend will continue in one direction every single year, or that we take the trend for granted; there is always more that can and must be done.

On that note, as the hon. Member for Batley and Spen said, the work includes not only policing—though that is a focus of this debate—but prevention. It is not simply the police who have to be involved, but every single Government Department.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman and I share North Lanarkshire Council. We have heard stories from around the country, and it is exactly the same in Scotland—that is what we are hearing. This year in North Lanarkshire, 900 formal warnings have been given for antisocial behaviour, and 200 have been prevented from going further with mediation. Will he congratulate North Lanarkshire Council on its work?

Stuart C. McDonald: I am happy to congratulate North Lanarkshire Council on that work, which emphasises the role that local authorities have to play. Among the statistics from yesterday was the 35% fall in serious

[Stuart C. McDonald]

violence and attempted murder in North Lanarkshire, so pretty much every part of Scotland is benefiting from some of that work. The point that I was making, however, is that it has to be a whole-systems approach; it is not just about policing, but about local authorities and every single Government Department being involved in the challenge.

On prevention—or nipping things in the bud, as the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) pithily put it—a lot has already been said in recent debates about the work of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow, which has also been rolled out elsewhere. The “No Knives Better Lives” campaign and programme have complemented other youth-diversionary interventions and activities. The mentors for violence prevention programme is designed to lead young people to more positive destinations and has 140 schools across 22 local authorities taking part. Another initiative, under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, is the cashback for communities fund, through which almost £100 million seized from criminals over the past 10 years has been invested directly in partnership organisations that put on free activities for those who might be at risk or who live in areas with higher than usual crime rates.

Policies need to address head-on the causes of offending behaviour. We know that deprivation is linked to higher crime rates, which is why in years ahead there will be additional investment and focus in the next phase of cashback for communities to raise the attainment of young people from areas of deprivation across Scotland, or those who are at risk of exclusion from schools or of unemployment. That mirrors education policies such as pupil equity funding and the Scottish attainment challenge, which are all designed to improve the life chances of those from more deprived areas of the country.

From another angle, we know that alcohol is a significant factor in all sorts of offences. Again, policies must be directed at that, and in Scotland we have seen the introduction of minimum unit pricing, which studies suggest can deliver a significant fall in some types of crime. I urge Members to consider engaging in that debate.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised the issue of air rifles. Again, the experience in Scotland has been pretty positive. We introduced licensing two or three years ago, and so far crime involving air rifles is down significantly.

I will finish on policing, which was at the crux of the debate for most Members. To cut to the chase, over the past 10 years police numbers in Scotland have gone up by about 5%, which contrasts with the cut in numbers of about 14% elsewhere in the UK. The Home Secretary himself has acknowledged that that is a crucial factor, so while I recognise that budgets are tight, it can be done. Policing in combination with all that work on prevention must be the way ahead.

5.27 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this vital debate.

Since records began, violent crime has never been as high as it is today. Knife crime has never been as high—homicides involving knives increased by 22%—while

arrests, the currency of deterrence, have halved in a decade. Unsolved crimes stand at an almost unthinkable 2 million cases. Each of those numbers represents victims, families and friends who have been scarred by violence, and together they represent a national crisis.

Two key things cause rising crime: cutting police numbers and slashing funding for youth services. What have this Government done? They have cut police numbers and slashed funding for youth services. To begin with the police cuts, it is important to remind the House that the Conservative party promised the public that its cuts would not hit the policing frontline. One week before the 2010 election, the previous Tory leader, David Cameron, said:

“Any cabinet minister...who comes to me and says ‘here are my plans’ and they involve front-line reductions, they’ll be sent straight back to their department”.

Five years later, the current Prime Minister claimed that the frontline service had been protected, but we now know that that was not true.

Police numbers are at their lowest for 30 years. We have lost 21,000 officers, more than 6,000 PCSOs and more than 15,000 police staff, including crime investigators. My own police force in Greater Manchester has lost 2,000 officers since 2010. No Government in post-war history—none—have cut police numbers in every year that they have been in office.

The public instinctively understand that cutting police numbers causes rising crime. After all, as the Home Secretary said recently, it is “not exactly rocket science”. Under-resourced police are forced to focus purely on reactive policing. Hotspot policing is known to reduce crime in areas where there has been a surge. Far from simply pushing it away into other areas, evidence suggests that the benefits are felt in areas outside where the hotspot policing is focused. It should therefore concern hon. Members that Chief Constable Thornton, the chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council says:

“I am utterly convinced that intelligence-led policing with a focus on prolific offenders and hot-spot locations makes a real difference. But few officers and staff are able to do less policing.”

Local policing has been shown to increase the legitimacy of the police, which encourages the local community to provide intelligence and report crimes and suspicious behaviour.

Last year, as part of the national initiative to spend a day with the police, I spent a day with my old force, Greater Manchester police. The officers told me that they no longer had the resources to go into schools and talk to students about what the police do and how to stay safe—a vital part of building community links. There is no doubt that the Tories have cut frontline policing, which is driving rising crime.

The second driver of rising crime is cuts to youth services. Our social safety net has been steadily unpicked by this Government. The most vulnerable are struggling to get support, starting at the very first stage of life. Sure Start was a lifeline for many vulnerable families, but it has been cut back and the support it can provide has been reduced. Schools have been crushed under the weight of punitive funding pressure. Cost cutting has hit teaching assistants and special educational needs—just the kind of targeted support that is needed by young people who are falling behind.

Chronic underfunding of the NHS means that young people are routinely denied the mental health support we know can reduce aggression. For those who set out on the wrong path, the Government have ensured an almost total lack of provision for those involved in gangs. Even at this late stage, education, training, employment and health services can reduce violence, including homicides. The sad truth is that, despite the research showing that specialist services for vulnerable youngsters and families can fundamentally alter outcomes, there is not the political will to create a system that will support them. Those decisions taken together have precipitated the crisis we face today.

The Government have cut police numbers to a historic low and cut youth services at every stage of development, and they are now surprised by record crime levels. The most despicable criminals are exploiting the space where well-run and effective early intervention, prevention and diversion strategies once existed.

5.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this interesting debate, which looks at the issue from the perspective of smaller towns and communities—we call them villages in my part of Lincolnshire—and I am pleased to take part in it. I thank hon. Members from across the House for the examples they have given of crime and antisocial behaviour in their constituencies. There have been some particularly moving examples, and I am sure the whole House is united in hoping that those who have been devastated by those crimes get the help and support they need.

This Government are committed to tackling and preventing crime and antisocial behaviour, and we recognise the particular challenges that smaller towns and communities may face, including in Northern Ireland; we may not have heard all that we wished to hear from Northern Ireland, but I am sure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will tell us what is happening there.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: If the hon. Gentleman promises that he will be brief, I will.

Jim Shannon: Let me give the Minister some examples of what we have done: antisocial behaviour officers are in the councils; the PSNI work alongside street pastors and churches; and local community groups organise events to take young people away. Those are three things that make a difference. Also, it is not down to the police only, but the parents.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it is a community effort, in spite of the importance of law enforcement. That is why, in our Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, we put in place six powers, some of which can be exercised not just by the police but by local authorities. We appreciate that there will be different solutions to different problems in different areas.

The debate is about “rising crime”. I fully recognise the concerns that Members have raised, but I must remind them of the analysis by the independent Office for National Statistics, which sets out that most people are not victims of crime, and that the likelihood of becoming a victim remains low. We also recognise that there has been a genuine rise in serious violent crime, and there is a range of actions under way to tackle that.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the Minister realise how maddening the comment, “You are not likely to be the victim”, is to our constituents? If somebody is stabbed in their street or there is a drunk and disorderly person in their shopping centre, they are the victims, and that has an impact on their behaviour.

Victoria Atkins: That is the finding of the Office for National Statistics. We have to work on the evidence; that is the way in which we formulate policy. It is a great shame that the hon. Lady was not able to join the briefing session I held yesterday for colleagues from across the House, to update them on our actions to tackle serious violence. She would have seen the range of activity going on, not just in London but across the country, to tackle crime and the causes of criminal activity. Although the statistics are very worrying at the moment—that is why we are acting as we are—it was acknowledged yesterday in the meeting that there is a cyclical element to them. We saw similar spikes in serious violence in the mid to late 2000s. We bore down on them, and we need to ensure that our actions have a similar impact.

In our serious violence strategy, we put a much greater focus on steering young people away from crime while continuing to promote a strong law enforcement response. We are investing in early intervention projects—my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made that important point. I am delighted to tell the hon. Member for Batley and Spen that West Yorkshire is receiving more than £1 million until March next year to allow the police, community safety partnerships and others to work together on a programme of early intervention projects to prevent serious violence in the county.

We have also launched the national county lines co-ordination centre, and its work has produced huge benefits; in a single week in May, there were 586 arrests, and 519 vulnerable adults and 364 children were engaged with for safeguarding purposes. I am sure that many colleagues are conscious of the exploitation of young people by criminal gangs. On serious violence, we are looking at how gangs communicate in the 21st century and helping the police to tackle gang-related activity on social media.

We recently passed the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, which tightens up the law on the sale of knives and corrosive substances. We are in the middle of a consultation, to which I encourage hon. Members to respond, on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence. We have introduced a new £200 million youth endowment fund that will be delivered over 10 years. It is locked in. That money will be invested, and it will support long-term interventions with children and young people at risk of involvement

[*Victoria Atkins*]

with crime and violence. We are conducting an independent review of drug misuse, which will report its initial findings to the Home Secretary in the summer.

As colleagues have mentioned, we have established vehicle theft and burglary taskforces to bring together Government, the police and industry in order to improve our response to those crimes. With reference to burglaries, we are looking at building standards and whether we can design out crime, as has happened in the past with vehicle theft. We continue our work with moped-enabled crimes; in London there has been a heartening decrease in that type of crime. That shows that working across civil society, industry and local authorities can really bring dividends. Colleagues will also be aware of the announcements about retail crime we made recently with regard to the Offensive Weapons Act. I very much hope that we will be able to announce the results of that consultation in due course.

Hon. Members also mentioned the impact of antisocial behaviour. We absolutely recognise the impact that forms of antisocial behaviour can have, which is precisely why we introduced the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. The point of the six powers in that Act is that they are flexible and give local forces and local authorities discretion in how they deal with instances and patterns of antisocial behaviour in their areas.

In summary, we very much recognise the impact of crime on not just big cities, but market towns, urban towns, if I am allowed to use that phrase, and villages. That is precisely why, as well as putting in place the suite of measures that we have touched on in this important debate, we have secured an extra £1 billion of funding for the police. That is already enabling police and crime commissioners, including in West Yorkshire, to increase the recruitment of police officers.

As always, I thank hon. Members for their contributions. I very much look forward to debating this issue again in the future. I think we all recognise that concerns about

the safety of our constituents and our communities are central to our work here, and to our taking a collegiate approach across the House to ensuring that our country is a safe and comforting place in which to live.

5.41 pm

Tracy Brabin: I thank colleagues across the House for their contributions. It is really interesting to know that I am not alone in representing a community that feels that crime has got out of hand. I congratulate West Yorkshire police on the work it does. The Minister talked about money for the police, but the money for West Yorkshire comes from an increase in the precept—the precept is increased in order to increase the number of police officers—so we are paying for it.

I was happy to attend the serious violence strategy meeting, at which I learned a lot. It was really interesting, and a lot of initiatives seem to be going on. However, those initiatives feel focused on knife crime, which is the sort of violent crime that comes at the end. I asked at the meeting what is being done to intervene right at the beginning, and in our communities, to ensure that people do not feel abandoned or that crime is their only hope of getting money, having status or whatever, and are not vulnerable to gangs and so on. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) said, early intervention is so important.

Although I understand why it was said, there is an element of complacency around this, in that—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady in full flow. We all wanted to hear it, but the rules are strict, and we must stop at precisely the right second.

5.43 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10 (14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 5 June 2019

TREASURY

European Union Finances

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): I am today laying before Parliament the “European Union Finances 2018: statement on the 2018 EU Budget and measures to counter fraud and financial mismanagement” (CP 114). This is a routine annual publication and is the 38th in the series.

The statement gives details of revenue and expenditure in the 2018 European Union Budget, recent developments in EU financial management and measures to counter fraud against the EU Budget. It also includes a chapter and annex on the use of EU funds in the UK over the period.

This year, in light of the UK’s vote to leave the EU, the paper also contains an annex with the latest forecast (previously published in the OBR’s Economic and fiscal outlook in March 2019) of the UK’s financial settlement, as detailed in the withdrawal agreement. Since this forecast, the Government have agreed an extension of Article 50. This extension will affect the size of the financial settlement as the UK will make contributions to the EU as a member state, which would have fallen due under the implementation period. The net effect on EU contributions is zero.

[HCWS1598]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) in Brussels on 21 May 2019. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member state and continue to act in good faith. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union’s website at:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2019/05/19/>

Multiannual financial framework 2021-2027

Ministers discussed the structure of external action expenditure during the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework (MFF). Discussion centred around the neighbourhood, development and international co-operation instrument (NDICI), and the European development fund (EDF). Ministers focused on the Commission’s proposal for integrating the EDF into the EU budget. The Commission stated that this would streamline previous spending on external action by bringing together 12 programmes; a single and larger fund would have more

flexibility to respond to emerging priorities. Several member states argued that the European neighbourhood should remain a separate fund or ring-fenced within the NDICI, due to the need to prioritise Europe’s near neighbours.

Preparation of the European Council on 20-21 June 2019: Annotated draft agenda

Ministers discussed the annotated draft agenda of the European Council on 20-21 June. The agenda included the 2019-2024 strategic agenda, the 2021-2027 MFF, climate change and countering disinformation.

The majority of member state interventions focused on climate change, the strategic agenda and enlargement. Ministers were keen to balance ambitious goals with maintaining the global competitiveness of the EU, and being able to address citizens’ needs effectively. A number of member states suggested that the Sibiu declaration should be incorporated into deliverable goals for the strategic agenda. Under discussions on enlargement, some member states hoped that progress would be made at the June European Council to allow accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania.

I intervened to welcome the Sibiu declaration on the strategic agenda. I also highlighted our commitment to combat disinformation in the EU through the joint action plan, as well as domestically, through the White Paper on online harms and the Cairncross review on upholding high quality journalism.

[HCWS1599]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Human Rights and Democracy Report 2018

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I have today laid before Parliament a copy of the 2018 Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Report on Human Rights and Democracy (Cp number: 104).

The report analyses human rights developments overseas in 2018 and illustrates how the Government worked to promote and defend human rights globally.

The report assesses the situation in 30 countries, which the FCO has designated as its human rights priority countries. These are Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

2018 marked the 70th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights, and the 20th anniversary of the UN declaration on human rights defenders. The report demonstrates the principles and values enshrined in these declarations. It sets out the UK’s actions to promote human rights and democracy in a wide range of areas, including through partnerships with human rights defenders, our leadership on promoting media freedom and gender equality, our work to eradicate modern slavery, and our commitment to deliver change for those who are abused, targeted or killed for their beliefs.

[HCWS1596]

JUSTICE

Judicial Salary Structure

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Today I am pleased to publish the Government's response to the Senior Salaries Review Body's (SSRB) major review of the judicial salary structure.

Our world-class independent judiciary is a pillar of our democracy and plays a unique role in ensuring our freedoms and prosperity. Every day judges take decisions on critically important issues that directly impact on people's lives—from trying serious crimes, to deciding care arrangements for vulnerable children.

High Court, circuit and upper tribunal judges in particular play a pivotal role in our justice system. They preside over the most difficult and sensitive family cases and criminal trials, often involving horrific and distressing evidence; resolve the most valuable and legally complex civil disputes; and ensure that the Government behave in a lawful and fair manner.

The importance and influence of our judiciary also reaches beyond our shores. Its reputation for integrity and impartiality helps attract international business to the UK, contributing to a legal services industry worth around £25 billion a year to our economy.

These important judicial roles require highly experienced legal professionals with many years of training and experience behind them. It is imperative that we continue to attract the highest calibre candidates to take up these critical posts.

The SSRB's major review, which was presented to this House on 26 October 2018, identified clear evidence of severe recruitment and retention issues in the High Court, and of growing problems at the circuit bench and similar issues in the upper tribunal.

For the first time ever, in consecutive recruitment campaigns, we have now failed to fill vacancies in the High Court and at the circuit bench. Currently more than 10% of High Court judicial positions remain unfilled and, as things stand, the chancery division of the High Court, which handles major commercial cases, is already 20% below strength and will be up to 40% below strength by the end of the year without urgent action. The impact of vacancies is already being felt in the family courts, where a shortfall of judges is contributing to significant delays in care proceedings, which involve vulnerable children.

If these recruitment and retention issues are not addressed, cases will take longer to progress through our courts and tribunals, victims of crime will have to wait longer for justice, and vulnerable people and children will be left at risk. If we are unable to fill the growing number of vacancies with judges of the right quality, delays in our courts could also mean business is lost to other English-speaking courts in Singapore, Amsterdam, Paris and elsewhere.

This Government are committed to delivering world-class public services and taking action when the evidence requires it to ensure their continued delivery. That is why today I am announcing a series of policies to support recruitment and retention in the judiciary, to ensure our courts and tribunals system can continue to deliver important services.

The Government are committed to addressing the underlying cause of the recruitment and retention problems. However, it would not be sensible to make pension changes when the McCloud litigation, which could have a significant but uncertain impact on public service pensions, is ongoing. Once that litigation has concluded, the Government will bring forward legislation for a long-term, pensions-based solution for the whole judiciary.

However, there is now a need for immediate action, which is why today I am announcing the introduction of a temporary recruitment and retention allowance at 25% for salaried High Court judges, and 15% for circuit and upper tribunal judges covered by the new pension scheme.

This measure will affect only about a quarter of the salaried judiciary and aims to resolve the immediate recruitment issue until a long-term, sustainable, pension-based solution can be implemented for all judges.

It replaces the existing allowance of 11% for High Court judges, and is lower than the SSRB's recommendation of a 32% permanent salary increase for High Court judges and a 22% increase for circuit and upper tribunal judges covered by the new pension scheme, striking a balance between an appropriate investment of public funds and addressing serious recruitment and retention problems.

We recognise that the SSRB also pointed to emerging recruitment issues at the district bench and, while the evidence of a problem is not currently strong enough to necessitate immediate action at this tier of the judiciary, we are committed to addressing the underlying cause of the recruitment and retention problems highlighted by the SSRB through a long-term solution for the whole judiciary, which will include pension scheme changes.

The Government will also be making an annual pay award for 2019-20 of 2% for all judges, which will be backdated to 1 April 2019. In addition, we will ensure that judges are placed in the correct salary groupings based on the evidence provided by the SSRB and their independent job comparison panel. Salary group changes will come into effect at the start of the legal year, 1 October 2019.

Similarly the Government will consult on measures designed to address pension tax disincentives that may encourage senior clinicians to limit or reduce their workloads while participating in the NHS pension scheme.

In addition, the Government fully endorse the work that the Lord Chief Justice and Senior President of Tribunals are leading to strengthen leadership and support career development in a modern and professional judiciary.

This includes taking practical steps by encouraging and supporting eligible candidates from under-represented groups successfully to apply for judicial office; supporting career progression for existing judges; growing leadership capability within the judiciary by implementing appraisals and career discussions; developing new training for leadership judges; and giving leadership judges the data and tools they need to drive performance in the system.

This Government are committed to delivering world-class public services and taking action when the evidence requires it to ensure their continued delivery. That is why today I am announcing a package of measures which strikes the right balance between the importance of ensuring we can recruit and retain world-class judges for the future and the necessary investment of public funds.

A copy of the Government response to the SSRB's major review has been laid in both Houses and will be available online at www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1597]

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers will meet on 6-7 June in Luxembourg. I will represent the UK for justice day. Sir Tim Barrow, Permanent Representative of the UK to the EU and Chris Jones, Director of the Europe Directorate at the Home Office, will represent the UK for interior day.

Justice day on 6 June will begin with a progress report on the proposal on the third-party effects of assignment of claims, which is currently being negotiated in Council working groups. The UK has opted out of this proposal but continues to input to ensure that the legislation does not create any unintended disruption to current financial market practice.

There will then be a policy debate about the use of IT in the proposals to amend the service and taking of evidence regulations. Member states have been divided on the extent to which the processes in each should be digitised. Subject to further considerations about costs, Ministers will be asked whether a mandatory IT system should be introduced and, if so, whether it should be a centralised system or one that is decentralised and based on the existing systems in each member state, and what preferences they have for the type of software that should be used. The UK opted in to the proposal on the service regulation but not the proposal on the taking of evidence regulation.

The Council will then discuss non-legislative activities. First, there will be a policy debate on the future of EU substantive criminal law, which follows a survey of member states seeking views on the use of substantive law in future EU proposals. Given that it looks to future legislative activity, after UK exit, the UK does not seek to direct the conclusions so I will not intervene.

During the working lunch, I will discuss with other Ministers the use of judicial training to foster mutual trust and exchange views on ways to enhance the understanding, confidence and co-operation between judges and prosecutors within EU member states.

After lunch there will be a policy debate on the way forward in the field of mutual recognition in criminal matters. The aim of this debate is to identify matters which may help or hinder more effective mutual recognition, looking in particular at lessons that may be learned from recent CJEU case law and views put forward by member states. In so far as this looks to future legislative activity, the UK does not seek to direct this project since it would be realised after UK exit. The UK is, however, supportive of this work since we aim to be a co-operative partner following UK exit, and as a member state, have experience to offer to the project. I will therefore indicate that the UK will provide its general support and offer assistance.

The presidency will then put Council conclusions which encourage Eurojust and the networks established in the area of judicial co-operation in criminal matters to further develop the co-ordination and synergies between

them to Ministers for adoption. The UK supports the work of Eurojust, and agrees that better co-ordination between networks hosted by Eurojust would be helpful for criminal justice co-operation.

The Commission will provide an update on the planned preparatory steps to make the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) operational by the end of 2020. The UK has not opted into EPPO.

The presidency will put the Council decisions relating to the opening of negotiations for EU-US agreement on cross-border access to e-evidence, and authorising the participation in the negotiations on a second additional protocol to the Budapest convention, to ministers for adoption. Whilst the UK supports the overall aim of enhanced international co-operation on e-evidence and its use in preventing and tackling harms to public security, it has not opted into these Council decisions.

Finally, Ministers will adopt the retention of data for the purpose of fighting crime. The agenda item relates to efforts to overcome the challenges of ECJ judgments relating to communications data regimes. The UK supports comprehensively exploring options for lawful regimes in member states, although shares some concerns to an EU-wide legislative solution. The UK has not opted into the relevant measure(s) but this is of interest in the ongoing UK-US CLOUD Act negotiations.

Lithuania will then provide information on actions against judges and prosecutors. Lithuania is seeking co-operation against any possible Interpol alerts launched by Russia to locate or arrest Lithuanian officials involved in a Lithuanian court against former Soviet military officials found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in 1991. I will highlight that the UK considers very seriously any misuse of INTERPOL notices and is committed to ensuring that international norms and codes are upheld.

Interior day will take place on Friday 7 June. Sir Tim Barrow, Permanent Representative of the UK to the EU and Chris Jones, Director of the Europe Directorate at the Home Office, will represent the UK for interior day.

The Council will hold a policy debate on the future of EU law enforcement, and in particular the need for an integrated approach to policing, interagency co-operation and further development of EU policing solutions. The UK supports the concept of an integrated approach to security, accompanied by the development of EU policing solutions which respond to changing threat landscapes and evolving technologies.

The EU counter-terrorism co-ordinator will then present on the implications of 5G for law enforcement work. The UK supports discussion at EU-level on this issue, and further thinking on the nature and extent of the challenges posed by this emerging technology.

The Council will then receive an update on co-operation between competent authorities dealing with counter-terrorism. The presidency will update on work being undertaken to explore practical ways on how to co-operate. The UK supports such co-operation where this adds value over existing exchanges between law enforcement authorities and Europol.

Over lunch, Ministers will undertake an exchange of views with representatives of the UNHCR and the IOM on the challenges ahead on migration and asylum. Following the rise in migrant arrivals across the central

Mediterranean, the discussion will return to seeking sustainable solutions on disembarkation and strengthening the response upstream. The UK intervention will focus on our extensive support upstream which ranges from tackling organised immigration crime and the use of strategic communications to building partnerships and capability with source and transit countries to jointly address the drivers of migration.

The presidency will seek to reach a general approach on the draft directive on common standards and procedures in member states for returning illegally staying third-country nationals (recast), with the exception of article 22 on the border procedure and the related recitals. The UK has not opted into this measure and will not intervene.

The presidency will also seek partial general approaches on draft regulations establishing the integrated border management fund, establishing the asylum and migration fund, and establishing the internal security fund. These are subject to wider negotiations on the overall multi-annual financial framework. The UK will not participate in any of these funds, and will not intervene.

[HCWS1600]

PRIME MINISTER

Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Panel Members

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The fire in Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017 was an unimaginable tragedy that should never have happened. The Government set up the Grenfell Tower Inquiry to get to the truth about what happened, deliver justice for victims, survivors, bereaved families and the wider community, and to ensure that such a terrible tragedy could never happen again.

Section 7 (1)(b) of the Inquiries Act 2005 allows me to appoint panel members to the inquiry panel at any time during the inquiry. I have recently announced that Professor Nabeel Hamdi and Thouria Istephan will be appointed to the inquiry panel for phase 2 of the inquiry's work.

Professor Nabeel Hamdi is a widely accomplished academic with an international reputation in housing and participatory design and planning. Thouria Istephan is an experienced and highly respected architect with a professional focus on health and safety. She is a partner at Foster + Partners and has a range of skills and experience directly relevant to the issues that the inquiry will be investigating in phase 2 of its work.

Given the extent of the tragic circumstances surrounding the fire, we should not be surprised by the scale and breadth of issues to be investigated that have emerged from the inquiry's work. Phase 2 of the inquiry will be the largest phase in terms of the number and range of issues to be considered and I am confident that these appointments will ensure that the inquiry panel has the diversity of skills and expertise necessary for the scope and complexity of issues to be addressed by phase 2 of the inquiry's work.

I wrote to the Chair of the inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, before recess informing him of my decision and to seek his consent to the appointments in accordance

with section 7(2)(b) of the Inquiries Act 2005. Sir Martin replied on 29 May 2019 consenting to the appointment. Our exchange of letters can be found on gov.uk: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/names-of-grenfell-tower-inquiry-panel-members-announced-30-may-2019>

[HCWS1595]

TRANSPORT

Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

The Transport Council will be taking place in Luxembourg on Thursday 6 June. This will be the only Transport Council under the Romanian presidency (the presidency).

The Council is expected to reach a general approach on a proposal from the third tranche of the "mobility package" for a legal framework for the electronic communication of freight transport information. The proposal would oblige member state authorities to accept electronic freight documents related to the transport of goods. The Government consider that the proposal includes some positive changes to modernise the processes and, as currently drafted, will provide an acceptable balance between EU-wide action and national discretion.

Next, there will be a progress report on a proposal from the third tranche of the "mobility package" for the regulation on streamlining measures for the realisation of the trans-European transport network (TEN-T). The proposal aims to provide a streamlined approval process for transport infrastructure projects on the TEN-T, speeding up their implementation.

Following this, the Council will give a progress report on a proposal from the first tranche of the "mobility package" to revise the current directive on the use of hired vehicles which aims to regulate under which circumstances member states could limit goods vehicles registered overseas from being hired by their hauliers.

Afterwards, there will be a progress report on the proposal from the first tranche of the "mobility package" to revise the current directive on Eurovignette (road charging). This will provide an update on negotiations on proposals to amend the current directive on charging of heavy goods vehicles. Our view, that national Governments should have the flexibility to do what is right in their circumstances, is shared by many other member states.

Next, the presidency has prepared a progress report on negotiations on proposals to revise the regulation on rail passengers' rights and obligations, aimed at strengthening the rights of rail passengers, including by improving access for people with disabilities or reduced mobility.

Under any other business, the presidency will provide information on other current legislative proposals. Additionally, it will give an update on "Clean planet for all", the European strategic long-term vision for a prosperous, modern, competitive and climate neutral economy. The Luxembourg delegation will present information on tackling greenhouse gas emissions and congestion by aviation pricing. The Commission will supply information on three items: airspace capacity;

connectivity-related outcomes of the EU-China summit that took place in Brussels on 9 April 2019; and a study on transport externalities. The Polish delegation will supply information on the conference on “Benefits for regions resulting from the implementation of the route Via Carpatia” that took place in Lancut on 17 April 2019. Finally, the Finnish delegation will provide information on the work programme of their forthcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Over lunch, EU Ministers will be asked to endorse a joint declaration on transport co-operation between the EU and the six eastern partner countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The joint declaration aims to take stock of the main achievements in the transport relations between the EU and the eastern partner countries over the years and it is not legally binding.

[HCWS1594]

Petition

Wednesday 5 June 2019

OBSERVATIONS

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE

Public confidence in the Prime Minister

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Prime Minister repeatedly promised that the UK would leave the European Union on 29 March 2019 and that the only way to prevent that happening without a deal was for our Prime Minister's Withdrawal Agreement to be approved by Parliament; further notes that despite her Withdrawal Agreement having been rejected by the House of Commons on three separate occasions, the Prime Minister intervened personally to prevent UK leaving the EU on 29 March 2019, further intervened to prevent the UK leaving the EU on 12 April 2019 and has now agreed with the EU without the prior approval of her Cabinet or Parliament that the UK cannot leave the EU before 31 October 2019 without a deal notwithstanding having incurred expenditure in excess of £4 billion for that purpose and the Prime Minister having repeatedly stated to UK citizens that in her view no deal is better than a bad deal; further

expresses its dismay that the Prime Minister has also conceded that the UK is not allowed to renegotiate the Withdrawal Agreement or open negotiations on a future relationship with the EU prior to 31 October 2019 thereby going back on her guarantee that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed; and further as a result that they have no confidence in the Prime Minister.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons hold a debate and make a decision on a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister at the earliest opportunity.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Christopher Chope, Official Report, 30 April 2019; Vol. 659, c. 175.]

[P002451]

Observations from the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster):

The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 sets out in legislation the wording for a motion of no confidence, namely "That this House has no confidence in Her Majesty's Government". If such a motion is carried and the House does not pass a subsequent motion "That this House has confidence in Her Majesty's Government" within 14 days, an early general election will take place.

It is an established convention that if the Official Opposition tables a no confidence motion in Her Majesty's Government, the Government will facilitate Parliamentary time for a debate on that motion. This last happened in January 2019 when the House of Commons confirmed it had confidence in the Government.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 5 June 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	123	CABINET OFFICE—continued	
Candidates with Disabilities.....	128	The Cornish People.....	126
Cyber-security.....	129	Topical Questions	131
Electoral Integrity Consultation	123	Voter ID Pilots.....	127
Electoral Registration: Non-UK EU Citizens	124		
Government Procurement.....	131	PRIME MINISTER	134
Overseas Electors.....	130	Engagements.....	134

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 5 June 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION	7WS	PRIME MINISTER	13WS
General Affairs Council.....	7WS	Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Panel Members	13WS
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	8WS	TRANSPORT	14WS
Human Rights and Democracy Report 2018	8WS	Transport Council.....	14WS
JUSTICE	9WS	TREASURY	7WS
Judicial Salary Structure	9WS	European Union Finances	7WS
Justice and Home Affairs Council.....	11WS		

PETITION

Wednesday 5 June 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>
CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE	3P
Public confidence in the Prime Minister.....	3P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 12 June 2019**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 5 June 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 123] [see index inside back page]

*Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office
Prime Minister*

Interim NHS People Plan [Col. 149]

Answer to urgent question—(Stephen Hammond)

Sure Start: IFS Report [Col. 160]

Answer to urgent question—(Anne Milton)

Vehicle Emissions (Idling Penalties) [Col. 170]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Freehold Properties (Management Charges) [Col. 171]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Preet Kaur Gill)—agreed to

Rehabilitation of Offenders [Col. 173]

Motion—(Robert Buckland)—on a Division, agreed to

Animals [Col. 188]

Motion—(David Rutley)—agreed to

Backbench Business

Invisible Disabilities and Accessibility Challenges [Col. 203]

General debate

Petitions [Col. 233]

Funeral Plans: Regulation [Col. 237]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Industrial Strategy: North-East of England [Col. 79WH]

Transport: Cheshire [Col. 102WH]

Universal Credit and Debt [Col. 113WH]

Authorised Absence from School [Col. 137WH]

Crime and Antisocial Behaviour: Small Towns [Col. 145WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 7WS]

Petition [Col. 3P]

Observations

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
