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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 13 June 2019

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Transport Connectivity: North of England

1. **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve transport connectivity in the north of England. [911316]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Mr Speaker, as you know, we have a big programme of investment in transport across the north, after decades of underinvestment. That includes replacing every single train in the north of England, getting rid of the long-outdated Pacer trains, buying new trains for the Newcastle upon Tyne Metro and investing nearly £3 billion in the road network in the north, including an extensive smart motorways programme. The Transforming Cities funds are delivering to individual cities the opportunity to improve metro systems.

Judith Cummins: The Secretary of State may have seen that newspapers across the north have come together again this week to call on the Government to commit to a series of policy changes to power up the north. Towns and cities, villages and hamlets—despite our diversity, the north stands as one to call for more powers and more funding. At the heart of that must be the transformative new rail network linking the great north cities, including Bradford. Will the Secretary of State grasp this moment and make Northern Powerhouse Rail a priority, with a city centre station in Bradford?

Chris Grayling: First, Northern Powerhouse Rail is a manifesto commitment for this Government. The work is being done at the moment to take it forward. Indeed, as the hon. Lady should be aware, in the past few days we have published further details of the interchanges between Northern Powerhouse Rail and HS2, thus demonstrating further our commitment to that project.

With regard to Bradford, as the hon. Lady knows, I have had meetings with the council leader. I am extremely sympathetic to the need to ensure that Bradford is a proper part of the Northern Powerhouse Rail network.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend consider publishing a report, showing in table form the investment in transport in the north between 2010 and 2019, and between 2001 and 2010, so that we can see what investment has been given to the north over the past nine years, and in the previous nine years, which just happened to be under a different Government? This Government can be incredibly proud of the investment in the north.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I pay tribute to him for what he did to step up investment in the north. When I listen to the Opposition waxing about a lack of investment in the north, I simply remind them that when they were in power they let a Northern Rail franchise with no investment in it at all, whereas this Conservative Government are replacing every single train in the north with either a brand-new or a completely refurbished train.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): When I drive around Europe this summer, I will not find any two major cities less well connected than Sheffield and Manchester. A review has been done of improving the road connections between those two cities, and there is now an agreed best way forward. When will the Government activate that, so that we get an all-purpose, all-weather route between those two cities?

Chris Grayling: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the concept of the tunnel, which has been much reviewed and much discussed, is on the board agenda for the next Transport for the North meeting, and we are looking forward with interest to seeing the detail of those proposals. It is clearly necessary to improve trans-Pennine links. That is why we are committed to dualling the A66 and are putting in improvements on the A69. It is why I have asked Highways England to start work on better links between east Lancashire and west Yorkshire. Quite clearly, particularly given the vulnerability of the M62 to bad weather, a second route between Manchester and Sheffield must also be a part of the future.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Although North West Leicestershire is the centre of the midlands, most people in London think it is in the north. Despite delivering the highest economic growth outside London and the south-east, we have no passenger railway station. What is the Secretary of State going to do about that? Would not reopening the Ivanhoe line be an excellent idea?

Chris Grayling: I am very much aware of the potential to expand services in the east midlands by bringing back into service some of the routes that no longer carry passengers. It is why the new franchisees in the east midlands will be looking at bringing back services on the Robin Hood line, and I am happy to commit to discuss with my hon. Friend in much more detail whether we can do something similar in future with the Ivanhoe line.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Thirty-three northern newspapers, including the *Manchester Evening News*, *The Northern Echo*, the *Yorkshire Post*, the *Sheffield Star* and the *Liverpool Echo*, are all supporting the Power Up The North campaign, demanding an end to underinvestment in the north. This Government have repeatedly broken their promises of investment in the north,

with the region set to receive just a fraction of the investment to be made in London, and “northern powerhouse” has to be much more than a slogan. So will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to commit not only to electrifying the trans-Pennine route, but to matching Labour’s £10 billion-plus commitment to deliver a Crossrail for the north?

Chris Grayling: What I am not going to do is match Labour’s record of investment in the north, because it was lousy. The Labour Government spent nothing on trains, and did not upgrade railways in the north. We are upgrading roads in the north, and upgrading railways across the north. The trans-Pennine upgrade is the flagship—the largest investment programme on the railways in the next control period—and Labour Members have the brass neck to say that they are the ones with a plan. They did nothing; we are doing things.

Hammersmith Bridge

2. **Zac Goldsmith** (Richmond Park) (Con): If he will allocate funding to Transport for London for the repair of Hammersmith bridge. [911317]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): The maintenance of Hammersmith bridge is a matter for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. Neither the borough nor Transport for London has approached the Department to seek funding to repair the bridge.

Zac Goldsmith: I am very disappointed that they have not done so. I understand the temptation for the Government to see this as a local issue, but it is much more than that. Greater London has just 33 major crossings; this one took 20,000 cars and 1,800 buses a day, so its closure for up to three years is catastrophic for residents and businesses, and is causing mayhem in an already congested part of London. I was disappointed to hear what the Minister said about not being approached by the borough or TfL—that needs to change—but the Government also need to show a proper interest, so may I please urge him to look at the matter again?

Michael Ellis: Transport in London is, of course, devolved to the Mayor of London. I have been astonished and exasperated in just the last couple of weeks in the Department to see how badly run Labour London’s transport is, and I am astonished by the indolence of the Labour London Mayor, Sadiq Khan. Hammersmith bridge is being neglected—my hon. Friend is right about that—by the Mayor, who is asleep on the job.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Transport Secretary should have done his homework a little better. I have here a copy of my letter to him of 11 April—and his response of 21 May; no urgency there—asking for assistance with funding for Hammersmith bridge, on the reasonable grounds that he had taken £800 million from the subsidy to TfL and the previous Mayor of London had wasted more than £40 million on the garden bridge. Can we stop the party politicking? Will the Secretary of State do his job sensibly and support TfL and Hammersmith Council, which are working together to resolve this matter, instead of grandstanding in this way?

Michael Ellis: It is a little rich for the hon. Gentleman to refer to party politics. The fact is that Hammersmith bridge has been a project for London since 2015, and the Mayor of London has done nothing about it. The fact is that it is the responsibility of the London borough and Transport for London mechanisms. The hon. Gentleman does not want to admit the facts, but the facts are those.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): It is now two months since the bridge closed, and the Thames is uncrossable for a remarkable three and a half-mile stretch. In that time, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham has not yet even produced a report diagnosing the problems. All that it has done is have a row with Labour-run Transport for London over funding for work when it has not yet worked out what it needs. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet the Mayor of London and the council to bang heads together between the two warring Labour authorities and get the bridge open again?

Michael Ellis: We often see Labour authorities needing to have their heads banged together, because they are often at war, as they appear to be in this case. It seems to me that banging heads together in regard to this matter would be a good thing, and I will carefully consider my right hon. Friend’s request.

Cycling

3. **Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Ind): What steps he is taking to increase the uptake of cycling as a means of transport. [911318]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): The Government are committed to increasing cycling and walking, and to making our roads safer for cyclists and pedestrians. Spending per head on cycling and walking has more than trebled since 2010, and about £2 billion is now being invested in cycling and walking over the current Parliament. That is helping to fund new infrastructure in many towns and cities.

Dr Wollaston: I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in wishing the very best to Chris Froome.

I welcome the removal of the cap from the Cycle to Work scheme, but many of the people who could benefit most from e-bikes are not in work. What will the Minister do to support the use of e-bikes and non-standard pedal cycles by older people and those with disabilities? Will he meet me to discuss how we can create a safer infrastructure to encourage such use, particularly in my constituency, where there has been a long-standing block to the Littlehempston to Totnes cycleway?

Michael Ellis: I shall be happy to meet the hon. Lady, and I extend similar sentiments to Chris Froome.

Investment has trebled since Labour was in office, thanks to this Government. In the past few days I have made two visits to support Bike Week, and I shall be making a Bikeability visit this afternoon. As a result of the Government’s £29 billion investment in roads, cycling is being supported, but, as I have said, I shall be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the matter further.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): As we have heard, this week is Bike Week, yet the Government's own statistics show that they are failing to increase cycling. Research shows many people are too scared to ride a bike. This is hardly surprising given that aggressive driving is increasing and 10 cyclists are killed or seriously injured every day, according to the road safety charity Brake. Is it not high time for the Government to show some leadership and make a substantial investment in safe cycle routes and more traffic police to encourage everyone to cycle, rather than just giving tax breaks to a few wealthier cyclists when they buy a new bike? What the Government should do now is make cycling for the many, not just the brave.

Michael Ellis: I am pleased to say that I have been cycling this week, so I do not think it is just the brave who are going cycling. The average number of miles cycled per person has increased by 54% since 2002. The number of trips cycled has remained between 14 and 18 for the last 16 years, however, and we are putting massive investment into this area and will continue to do so.

Leaving the EU: Ports

4. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU. [911319]

11. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU. [911328]

17. **Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU. [911335]

18. **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU. [911336]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The UK port sector is resilient and flexible, and is well placed to adapt successfully in preparation for Brexit. My Department continues to work with the border delivery group to ensure that trade continues with minimum friction at UK ports. The Government shall take all steps necessary to ensure that vital goods continue to flow into the country when the UK leaves the EU, and we continue to liaise closely with the devolved Administrations.

Hannah Bardell: Last month we learned that the National Audit Office warned the Transport Secretary in advance that there was a high likelihood of a successful legal challenge regarding the no-deal ferry contracts, which directly contradicts his previous responses on the subject, so when will he admit culpability and apologise for this reckless action, which has resulted in a hefty bill for the taxpayer?

Ms Ghani: I am afraid that the hon. Lady needs to look again at the notes that have been placed in her hand, because she has contradicted herself in that statement. It is absolutely right and proper for the Government to prepare for no deal, and that was exactly what we did to ensure that vital goods got into the country in case of a no-deal.

Chris Law: Can the Minister explain why the Secretary of State or his Department could not identify P&O Ferries, or indeed our wonderful ferry system in Scotland, CalMac, as candidates for additional cross-channel ferry services—both of them, unlike Seaborne, do have ships—and what is his Department's estimate for the next legal settlement?

Ms Ghani: I was hoping that the hon. Gentleman was going to talk up his own ports and the extra business that will become available once we have left Europe, considering how excited ports are about the further opportunities coming our way. As I mentioned earlier, it was right and proper that we prepared for no deal, and we were working with a number of Government Departments to make sure capacity was available. The question of capacity was not for this Department; it was for a number of other Departments. It is curious that the hon. Gentleman does not also reflect on what the Scottish Government wanted in place just in case they needed extra capacity as well.

Marion Fellows: So far the Secretary of State's reckless actions on ferry contracts alone have cost £43.8 million in termination payouts to Brittany Ferries and DFDS, £800,000 in consultancy fees and £33 million to Eurotunnel, with P&O also expecting £33 million-plus legal fees to be added to the final bill, so the sum will be over £110 million. What is being sacrificed to pay for this, and when will the Secretary of State apologise?

Ms Ghani: No-deal preparation carried out by this Department for freight capacity was just 1% of the overall budget for no-deal planning—1%.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The Welsh Assembly's Brexit Committee found that a no-deal Brexit would pose a serious threat to the port sector in Wales, particularly in Holyhead and Fishguard. What recent discussions has the Minister had with the port authorities to avoid no-deal chaos in these Welsh ports?

Ms Ghani: I welcome the question. I was at the inter-ministerial group, which I chair, with all the port authorities, and I met Associated British Ports just recently. It is working closely with us to prepare for no deal, and it is excited about the opportunities that we can put forward through Maritime 2050, our 30-year strategy for investment in our ports, both in technology and in our seafarers, to ensure that we are ready for our new opportunities.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): We have had no apology today, and the Secretary of State sits there and lets his Minister come to the Dispatch Box while he shakes his head. The reality is that the next no-deal deadline is October, but we are not going to have a new Prime Minister in place until July and we will then have the summer recess. It will therefore be almost impossible to make proper preparations for a no-deal Brexit in October, yet the Transport Secretary is supporting a no-deal candidate for the leadership of the Tory party. Can the Minister detail any work that is going on just now, or is the Department so reckless that it just does not care, which will result in further chaos and another £110 million down the drain?

Ms Ghani: I do not know what to say—the hon. Gentleman is disappointed that the Secretary of State is not at the Dispatch Box, but this is my portfolio and I am pleased to be responding to his question.

If the hon. Gentleman was close to the maritime sector, he would be aware that we have been working with it for the past two years and that just this week we had the inter-ministerial group meeting with the port sector and I appeared in front of the all-party parliamentary group for maritime and ports. There is extensive dialogue and constant research to see what we need to do to continue to prepare, and if this arises again, come October, we will put preparations in place.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): We could be just four months away from a disastrous no-deal Brexit, yet the Government have put on hold their contingency plans. The Secretary of State's previous efforts resulted in 89 lorries and a refuse truck pretending to be on convoy to Dover, when in reality that route takes 10,000 heavy goods vehicles a day. He doled out contracts to ferry companies that did not have any actual ferries, or the means to get them, with terms and conditions cut and pasted from a fast food takeaway. He also threw 33 million quid away in an out-of-court settlement, and there are potentially many more litigations coming down the track. Will the Minister please give us a clue as to the Secretary of State's next great plans?

Ms Ghani: Our plans amounted to just 1% of the no-deal planning, and it was the right thing to do for the Government to prepare for all eventualities. We were responsible in putting together the freight capacity that would be needed for critical supplies, including for the national health service. If the hon. Gentleman is so nervous about no deal, he should support a deal.

Road Safety

5. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve road safety. [911320]

7. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve road safety. [911323]

14. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve road safety. [911332]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): In June last year, the Department issued a written statement to Parliament that reported progress on the actions from its road safety statement. The statement also outlined more actions, such as putting £100 million into improving 50 of the most dangerous stretches of A roads in England and committing to a refreshed road safety statement and a two-year action plan to address four priority groups: young people, rural road users, motorcyclists and older vulnerable users.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Minister for that answer, but last year 157 people were sentenced for causing death by dangerous driving. The average length of the sentence given was just over six years. Does he agree that if this Government had introduced life sentences

for that crime, as they promised to do in October 2017, we might have seen a consequent improvement in road safety and fewer of those dreadful crimes occurring last year?

Michael Ellis: The Department and the Secretary of State take these matters extremely seriously, and a great deal of work continues to be done on the subject of road safety. Any deaths or injuries via drink-driving are of course totally unacceptable, and we will do everything we can to continue to mitigate that. The fact is that the Department has doubled the penalty points for improper use of a mobile phone while driving, and we have also been investing via Facebook in the Think! campaign. We continue to work across the board to mitigate these issues. We are in constant contact with the Home Office and the police service on this issue, and that will continue.

Gerald Jones: In August 2017, 22-month-old Pearl Melody Black from Merthyr Tydfil was killed after a runaway car hit a wall, which fell on top of her. The current legislation did not allow the Crown Prosecution Service to bring justice to my constituents, Paul and Gemma Black. I have written to the Secretary of State, to the Department and to Ministers and previous Ministers to request a meeting to see whether we can work together to bring about a change in the legislation so that other parents do not have to endure this in future. Will the Minister agree to meet me to see what can be done?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that tragic case of the runaway vehicle. The decision to prosecute lies with the Crown Prosecution Service. It would be inappropriate for the Department for Transport to comment on its decision, but I would be happy to meet him. I can say that DFT officials have been in discussion with the CPS and the Ministry of Justice about the case and dangerous driving offences more broadly, and we will continue to monitor the situation.

Marsha De Cordova: Last summer, I welcomed the Government's announcement of a moratorium on shared spaces—road designs that remove the physical divides between the road and footways. Those cause considerable danger for blind and partially sighted people, including me, even turning some roads into no-go areas for people with sight loss. Concerns remain about what will happen to current shared spaces and the Government's plans for the future. Can the Minister confirm that the Government recognise that such shared spaces are unacceptably inaccessible, and will funding be made available to make sure that they are made accessible for blind and partially sighted people?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the point, which the Department is cognisant of. Research is being done in Scotland on this subject, and we hope for some results from that in the next several months.

19. [911337] **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. One of the best ways to improve road safety, improve air quality and reduce congestion is to get on with the major roads network fund. Cornwall Council has prioritised the Camelford bypass as its main contribution to this scheme, and I would welcome a meeting with him to discuss it.

Michael Ellis: May I take this opportunity to say how much I enjoyed my visit to my hon. Friend's constituency while I was responsible for another portfolio some time ago? My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been to see the local challenge for the Camelford bypass and is therefore visibly sighted on it. It has much merit, and I am happy to meet my hon. Friend. My officials are working with Cornwall Council to assess the scheme so that a decision can be made as soon as possible, and I hope that it will get on and submit it.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend's mention of improvements to A roads. The most problematic A road in my constituency has had several visits from the Secretary of State. Detailed plans for improvements to what is known as the Sainsbury's junction in Mansfield are with the Department: can the Minister update me on progress?

Michael Ellis: I understand there will be an opportunity to bid for funding on that matter shortly.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new role. I hope that he will bring the same enthusiasm, especially for cycling and walking, as his predecessor, and I am sure that he is looking forward to appearing before the Transport Committee. Yesterday, our Committee was told that the Government need to change their approach to public education on using a mobile phone while driving if they are to fulfil the Prime Minister's ambition of making that offence as socially unacceptable as drink-driving. Will the Minister commit to taking action to increase public awareness of the risks of driving while using a mobile phone, whether handheld or hands-free, which we were told reduces motorists' capability to that of a brand-new driver. It is the equivalent of being at the drink-drive limit and makes a road traffic collision four times more likely.

Michael Ellis: It is very kind of the hon. Lady to invite me to appear before her Committee: I think that something is already in the diary.

On cycling, I have already spoken to Transport for London about that. I have been on a bike several times this week and will be again later.

On the important issue of mobile phone use while driving, the Department has been working extremely hard: we have increased the penalty points from three to six, and we have put a lot of investment into social media to warn users of the dangers, and we will continue to do so.

Public Transport

6. **Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to encourage greater use of public transport.
[911322]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Local bus journeys remain central to transport choices, accounting for around 59% of all public transport journeys. The Bus Services Act 2017, introduced by this Government, gives local authorities tools to improve local bus services and increase passenger numbers. The Government spend around £2 billion a year supporting passenger road transport. We are also investing record levels in the UK rail network as part of the biggest modernisation programme for many decades.

Jessica Morden: I know from constituents who commute that far more needs to be done to improve capacity and make traveling by rail more affordable, to encourage people out of their cars. What will Ministers do to address the fact that Wales is set to get only 6% of planned UK rail spending, despite Welsh routes making up 11% of the network? As part of that, can we have a new railway station for Magor as part of the new stations fund?

Chris Grayling: On that latter point, I am aware of the interest of the hon. Lady's constituents, and it is something we will look at very carefully. I hope she welcomes the Government's substantial investment in improved rolling stock, improved capacity and improved speed on the Great Western main line, which will benefit her constituency and the whole economy of south Wales.

The hon. Lady also talks about transport investment. It is surprising that, in the past few days, the Labour Administration in Wales have backed away from a major upgrade to the M4, which, of course, is the most significant artery for south Wales and its economy.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Given yesterday's announcement on legislating for net zero greenhouse gases, what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to decarbonise public transport?

Chris Grayling: We are taking a variety of different measures. In this country, we will shortly be seeing the first battery hybrid trains and the first hydrogen-powered trains, and we are providing support for low emission and ultra-low emission buses. Indeed, I recently went to the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), to see the work that the local bus company is doing to introduce entirely electric-powered local bus routes. There is a huge amount happening, but of course there is a lot more to do to decarbonise the whole public transport sector and our road transport, too.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Has the Secretary of State had any discussions with the Treasury regarding a public transport voucher scheme that can be taken from pre-tax wages to encourage people to use public transport and thereby lower carbon emissions in our cities?

Chris Grayling: I have not, but I would be happy to discuss the hon. Gentleman's concept. I am very interested in what he says.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Bus services are in crisis. Since 2010, over 3,000 routes have been cut, fares have risen twice as fast as wages and bus use is in freefall. Last month, the cross-party Select Committee on Transport published a report on bus services in England outside London that recommended how to end this crisis, including allowing all local authorities to regulate or own their local bus services, providing concessions to young people and boosting funding. The report was led by the evidence. Will the Secretary of State listen to that evidence, accept the recommendations and make them Government policy?

Chris Grayling: Of course we will be responding to the report shortly, but if the hon. Gentleman looks across the country he will see that the place where bus mileage has been falling fastest is in Labour-controlled Wales. Actually, there has been a small increase in the number of routes during my time as Secretary of State. The Government are committed to supporting new, innovative ways to expand bus utilisation, which is why we support the demand-responsive services that are emerging across the country and are committed to ensuring that we provide the best possible choice for passengers.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the powers under the 2017 Act, and in my time as Secretary of State, I have not received a single proposal or request to introduce bus franchising under that Act. Notwithstanding that fact, I would be happy to do so if I saw evidence that it would improve passenger services.

East Coast Main Line: New Trains

8. **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): What progress he has made on the roll-out of new trains for the east coast main line. [911325]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): A comment was made earlier about investment in the north, and the Azuma trains, which will shortly be running to the north-east and Scotland and are already running in Leeds, are a huge investment in transport connections to the north. They will reduce journey times, and alongside that the substantial multi-hundred million pound investment that we are putting into the east coast main line will improve journey times, too. That is another sign of this Government's commitment to providing better transport links in and for the north.

Julian Sturdy: I welcome that answer. The Secretary of State is right that the introduction of the new Azuma trains is an exciting development for the city of York, given the importance of the east coast main line to our great city, but can he assure me that we will have no further delays in their introduction? There have been signalling problems north of York, and the Azuma trains will be arriving in York on 1 August.

Chris Grayling: My understanding is that those trains are on track to start running as targeted at the start of August and will be going to Scotland later this year. They will deliver a transformative experience—more seats and faster, better journeys for people travelling from Scotland in the north to London and within the north, between places such as York and Newcastle. This is a really important investment.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that history will be kind about the right hon. Gentleman's contribution to transport in our country. These trains were promised last December, and they are still not properly in service. When will we get them? Is he not concentrating totally on that waste of money called HS2, which is squandering the national treasure?

Chris Grayling: It is interesting that when I speak to civic leaders in the north, they all talk enthusiastically about HS2. The new trains are already operating and have been for several weeks. They have been operating,

as intended, initially on the route to Leeds; they will start on the route to York, Newcastle and Edinburgh shortly; and later this year and/or early next year they will be in operation right the way up through Scotland. This is a huge investment in better transport for people all the way up the east coast.

Public Transport: London

9. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Mayor of London on the provision of public transport in the capital. [911326]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): Transport in London is devolved to the Mayor. Ministers and officials in the Department for Transport hold regular discussions with representatives of the Greater London Authority, including the Mayor and deputy Mayor, on a range of transport matters.

Theresa Villiers: Will the Minister speak to the Mayor of London to urge him to reverse the reductions in service to the end of the Northern line, which sees more trains turning back at Finchley Central, thereby requiring people to change trains?

Michael Ellis: I am sorry to say that the Mayor of London is letting Londoners down in transport. He has cancelled investment projects that are his responsibility, cut bus and underground services and axed an extension to the Metropolitan line, despite the Government loaning £2.6 million to the Mayor through our Department. I am appalled that, despite that loan, Sadiq Khan is letting Londoners down.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Let us hear Newcastle's view on the Mayor of London and the city of London.

Chi Onwurah: In those discussions with the Mayor of London, will the Minister seek his advice on why it costs more to take a bus four stops up the West road in Newcastle than it does to travel across the entire Greater London area? Will he advise the Minister for buses to apply that to the rest of the country, rather than cutting three quarters of a billion pounds from annual bus services?

Michael Ellis: One reason why the Mayor of London has a black hole in his budget is that he has not been running transport services properly. I am sure that the hon. Lady's area will be doing a better job and will hope to do a better job.

Network Rail: Accountability

10. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the accountability of Network Rail to its customers. [911327]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Department sets the strategy for Network Rail. Its priority is to deliver a safe and efficient railway for passengers, freight customers and

the taxpayer. The Secretary of State and I regularly meet Network Rail on its financial performance and progress against the aims set out in its delivery plan. The “Putting Passengers First” programme is built around issues facing the industry. We are engaging with Network Rail as it implements this programme.

Melanie Onn: Can the Minister tell me of any other publicly funded body that provides a service to 500 people every day that can decide to close that service, as Network Rail has with the Suggitt’s Lane crossing, without any consultation whatsoever?

Andrew Jones: We had a very good debate on the Suggitt’s Lane level crossing only last week in Westminster Hall. Network Rail is accountable to the Secretary of State, but that does not mean that we can interfere or overrule its operational decisions. However, I have undertaken to meet Network Rail to ensure that it is aware of the views of the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). I met some of the people who had travelled down from the area to understand their views and will ensure that Network Rail is fully sighted on those views.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Network Rail made a mistake when it demolished the Leyland bridge, which links my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). I am pleased to say that, with the Minister’s help, it is going to be rebuilt, but will he help us to keep the pressure up and ensure that those works are completed as soon as possible?

Andrew Jones: I will be happy to keep up the pressure. I recognise what a long-standing issue this is for my hon. Friend’s area and how hard he has campaigned on it, and I would be very happy to help.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Ebbw Vale to Cardiff line is a successful train service, but future improvements will require joint working between the Welsh Government, Network Rail and the Department for Transport, so will the Minister agree to meet me to help to secure extra investment for this crucial Valleys line?

Andrew Jones: I will of course happily meet the hon. Gentleman. The “Putting Passengers First” programme is all about greater collaboration and customer focus in the industry. I am happy to take that matter forward with the hon. Gentleman.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) pointed out, and as the Minister is well aware, residents in Grimsby and Cleethorpes are very angry about the closure of Suggitt’s Lane level crossing. I appreciate the Minister’s help and assistance, but the reality is that there is no real accountability on this issue. If the community cannot hold Network Rail to account through their elected representatives, surely it is now time to look again at the existing legislation.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has campaigned vigorously on this issue, and I know that he chaired a meeting on 31 May between Network Rail and North East Lincolnshire Council to discuss the issue and options for alternative provision, with specific reference to the Fuller Street bridge. I understand that Network

Rail has agreed in principle to contribute to the enhancement of that bridge, should it prove viable. The key point is to make sure that the views of all those involved are considered and that we come to a happy conclusion as quickly as possible. I am happy to work with all sides to help to achieve a positive outcome.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): One thing that would help with Network Rail accountability would be the devolution of that responsibility to the Scottish Government. If the Conservative party is committed to devolution and strengthening the United Kingdom, when will it devolve control of Network Rail to the Scottish Government?

Andrew Jones: Devolution was not recommended as part of the broader review of powers, but I will of course make sure that the hon. Gentleman’s views are considered by the Williams rail review.

Taxi Services

12. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve the (a) safety and (b) regulation of taxi services. [911329]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My Department is considering the responses to the consultation on draft statutory guidance, to be issued to licensing authorities, on how they should use their extensive existing powers to protect children and vulnerable adults when using taxis and private hire vehicles. The response to the report by the task and finish group on taxi and private hire vehicle licensing committed the Government—I am keen to do this—to bring forward legislation to enable national minimum standards in licensing, enable greater enforcement powers and establish a national licensing database to assist in the sharing of relevant information.

Paul Blomfield: The task and finish group to which the Minister refers made its recommendation last September. Five months later, the Government’s response was only that they would consider the recommendation. A further four months on, in a reply to a written question last week, the Minister could say only that they would continue to carefully consider the issue, with a view to legislating—you could not make this up, Mr Speaker—“when time allows”. Given the chaos of this Government, we have all the legislative time in the world. When are they going to act?

Ms Ghani: I can see that the hon. Gentleman is as keen as I am to legislate in this area. We responded to say that we would be looking at national minimum standards, national enforcement powers and a national licensing database. I really am keen to move forward on this issue as soon as I can, and I am just waiting for the most appropriate time to do so.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister knows what I am going to say, but I am going to surprise her, because this week, thanks to Steve McNamara and the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association, I had the chance to drive one of the wonderful new electric cabs in London. Is it conceivable that London will manage to electrify its taxis before the Government manage to bring forward the legislation?

Ms Ghani: I never want to lose out to the Mayor of London, so I hope that that is not the case. Greener taxis are on the agenda. Not only has the hon. Gentleman been incredibly supportive of this issue, but he has guided me in the putting together of our response to the task and finish group. As he knows, I really am keen to try to secure a date, and the fact that the matter has been mentioned multiple times this morning will help me to do so.

Weekday Train Services: Kettering

13. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of weekday train services northbound from Kettering on the main line under the (a) existing and (b) new train franchise. [911331]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Currently, on average, two East Midlands trains per hour call at Kettering northbound on weekdays, with one going to Corby and one to Nottingham. From December 2020, double the number of trains will call at Kettering: two will be on a dedicated St Pancras to Corby service and two will be on the long-distance Nottingham service.

Mr Hollobone: Kettering is a well-used, popular station with rising passenger numbers. Will the Minister confirm when electrification will arrive at Kettering and what other benefits to passengers there will be from the new train franchise?

Andrew Jones: The roll-out of the midland main line electrification is obviously a key project, and I will keep the House posted on its progress. I can inform my hon. Friend that the station will get many new benefits from the East Midlands franchise. They will include station wi-fi, LED lighting and help points. There will be improved lay-out and a bus interchange, a multimodal customer information system, drinking water fountains, customer lounges, refurbished toilets, new caf  s, customer waiting areas, a third-party west side station entrance development, 60 new secure cycle spaces, six electric vehicle charging points, ANPR car park technology, 200 additional car park spaces and air quality monitors. Basically, it is all happening at Kettering station.

Mr Speaker: Indeed, and no one knows how to excite and inspire better than the Minister. We will now hear from North Ayrshire and Arran, apparently in relation to matters Kettering. The mind boggles, but we are about to be enlightened.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): There is an issue that will, I am sure, have great importance for the people of Kettering, as it will for the people of Scotland. Fifty four per cent of delays and cancellations in Scotland are down to issues with Network Rail, and I am sure that the people of Kettering have a similar story to tell. Given that the respected think-tank Reform Scotland has said that the devolution of Network Rail to Holyrood would be a major step forward in integrating the Scottish transport network, why does the Minister not agree with Reform Scotland?

Andrew Jones: That was a very entrepreneurial link, Mr Speaker. As soon as the Scottish Government start using the powers that they have, they will be more credible when they ask for more.

Rail Connectivity: North-West

15. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps he has taken to increase rail connectivity between coastal communities and cities in the north-west. [911333]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Northern is now running an extra 2,000 services per week compared with two years ago and is introducing major improvements for its customers, including 101 brand new trains, which will be operating on the network from this summer. This is part of a major programme of rail investment across the north, which will see room for more than 40,000 passengers at the busiest times and will help transform the rail experience for coastal communities travelling into the cities.

Damien Moore: The hourly service from Southport to Manchester Piccadilly is absolutely vital for residents and businesses in Southport. Will my hon. Friend and the Department for Transport join Network Rail in supporting my bid to restore the hourly service from Southport to Manchester Piccadilly in the December 2019 timetable?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is a great champion of rail services in his area, just as he was of the Access for All bid for Hillside station. I appreciate how vital it is to have regular and reliable train services. I am aware that an additional service was added in the May '19 timetable, and we are working on an extra service for December. Obviously, I am very happy to keep the pressure up and will keep him posted as we make progress.

Public Transport: Disabled People

16. **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure that public transport is accessible to disabled people. [911334]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): In July 2018, my Department published the inclusive transport strategy. Our ambition is to create a transport system that provides equal access for disabled people by 2030, and to ensure that disabled people can travel confidently, easily and without extra cost. The Department is making good progress delivering on the many commitments set out in the strategy, and I will be providing a one-year report to Parliament in the summer.

Neil Gray: With responses to the consultation on audiovisual announcements on buses now received, what steps are being taken to see that this happens, and when can we finally expect to see the Government deliver on talking buses?

Ms Ghani: Audiovisual is incredibly important, and they should be delivered by 2020. We want to make sure that our buses are accessible, convenient and as cheap as they can be, and this new bit of technology will enable them to be so.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Buses are not the only form of public transport with accessibility problems. It is still a huge issue for disabled people to get on and off airplanes. I have had constituents tell me that they have been literally manhandled on to flights. Even though airports are accessible, the airlines themselves still have a problem, and often people are left bruised and humiliated. Will the Minister meet me to talk about how we can encourage airlines to do something about that?

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. And that should not be the case. We have put together a really good inclusive transport strategy that sets out how passengers can be treated appropriately in all elements of their travel, and the airports should be doing much better. There is an aviation strategy, and there is also quite a big chunk in the inclusive transport strategy. I am more than happy to sit down with the hon. Lady.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I was one of the MPs who was happy to support the Guide Dogs talking buses campaign. I even took a trip on a bus blindfold to experience the travel difficulties. It is now two years since the Bus Services Act 2017 was passed, and the Government are still stalling on the roll-out of audiovisual information. All we need is secondary legislation, so can we please have a timetable for when that secondary legislation will be brought forward?

Ms Ghani: We are dealing with the responses to the consultation and I will update the House as soon as I can. The hon. Gentleman can rest assured—I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on sight loss and I am very close to this issue. I want to make sure that buses are accessible to people with all sorts of disabilities.

Bus Services: England

20. **Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): What plans he has to improve bus services in England. [911338]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Bus Services Act 2017 provides the tools that local authorities need, such as enhanced partnerships and franchising, to improve local bus services. We are working with interested local authorities to determine which of the powers provided are best able to support bus networks in their areas. We are also ensuring that pioneering technology, such as the forthcoming bus open data digital service, can overhaul bus services across England and give passengers the information they need to travel with confidence.

Graham Stringer: When Nicholas Ridley deregulated bus services nearly a third of a century ago, he promised that bus services would increase and be used by more passengers. Actually, bus deregulation has been a catastrophe and a disaster for the travelling public. Is not the answer to this question absolutely obvious—that the Government should encourage and allow all local authorities in England to re-regulate their services?

Ms Ghani: Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman is painting an unrealistic picture. Up and down the country, there are varying numbers of bus passengers. In Bristol,

bus passenger numbers are up by 50% and in south Gloucestershire they are up by 36%. We need to put a package of items together to encourage people to use buses. There is the ability to have either franchising or enhanced partnerships that allow local authorities to have a stronger and better relationship with bus companies.

Mr Speaker: On this question, Grahame Morris.

21. [911339] **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Several Members have referred to the health of the bus market. What steps is the Minister taking to address the specific issues of the recruitment and retention of bus drivers, as highlighted in the Transport Committee's report, and, particularly, of safety, with regard to the Bill being promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western)?

Ms Ghani: Safety is absolutely key. We know that the driver's relationship with the passengers is what motivates most people to jump on a bus, especially if they have issues to do with disability. I will be responding shortly to the Transport Committee's report on buses.

Topical Questions

T1. [911341] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Given the Government's announcement yesterday about our commitment to pursuing a net zero strategy for carbon emissions, it might be helpful to set out three ways in which my Department is playing its part in taking this forward.

We are now awarding funding for innovative new ideas to transform the railways. I have already mentioned the first operating hydrogen train, but we are putting together a package of additional measures, which are being announced today, to upgrade the technology on the rail system. The Government car service is already taking steps to decarbonise its fleet. I will be encouraging other Government Departments to get their agencies that have fleets to do the same. This summer, we will be publishing our clean maritime plan setting out our role as a global leader in tackling the whole issue of carbon emissions in the maritime sector.

Paul Blomfield: After the May 2018 timetable changes, I raised with Ministers the sacrificing of direct London to Sheffield train services to improve local services for London and the south-east. The latest timetable makes minor changes but no improvements. We still have too few early evening services and longer average journey times than 14 months ago. In the week that northern newspapers launched their Power Up The North campaign, what message does the Secretary of State think that sends, and what is he going to do about it?

Chris Grayling: The message it sends is that we have been very clear that while we are going through the process of upgrading the midland main line, there will be some effects on services. However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the improvements that have just been completed at Market Harborough—one

of the big parts of the programme of upgrading the route. Derby station was another part completed fairly recently. This is designed to improve journey times to Sheffield as part of a commitment to transport both to his area and the whole of the north.

T2. [911342] Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Mayor and Transport for London have been consulting on major changes to the bus network in London. Will the Secretary of State urge the Mayor to drop his plans to remove the 384 bus route from many roads in New Barnet and the Bevan estate?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As my right hon. Friend will know, decisions on bus routes are down to the Mayor of London. I think he needs to focus on delivering for Londoners and not just faffing around trying to take selfies. He should be spending more time with Londoners to understand exactly the sort of bus services they need and which journeys they need to take.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): With transport emissions accounting for 29% of all toxic emissions released in the UK, and at a time when Labour has declared that climate change is an existential threat to our nation and planet, will the Secretary of State for Transport tell the House why he has failed to undertake a full environmental audit of road investment strategy 2—the most ecologically and environmentally damaging road building programme for a generation?

Chris Grayling: We have another example of the Labour party's war on the motorist. The hon. Lady should understand that the more congested our roads are, the higher the emissions. We cannot destroy our economy and get rid of our roads. We have to decarbonise road transport, but we also have to ensure that our roads flow smoothly. Those on the Labour Benches do not get that. They want to scrap road improvements, and they want more traffic jams. Those traffic jams increase emissions. The Labour party just does not get it.

Rachael Maskell: The Secretary of State may think that that answer gets him off the hook, but when road transport accounts for 69% of transport emissions, and air pollution claims 50,000 lives prematurely, he should be less complacent.

UK roads killed or seriously injured 27,000 people, including 2,000 children, last year. It is the most dangerous mode of travel. Why does the Secretary of State not invest in developing a sustainable, integrated public transport strategy, including active travel, as Labour would, instead of this catastrophe of a road building project?

Chris Grayling: We now know the truth: the Labour party is going to be anti-motorist. It is going to be anti-road improvements. It is going to set itself against the things we are doing to try to boost our economy in all parts of the country, through connections to our ports and better motorway links, unlocking the economic potential of places like west Cumbria. Labour does not care. We will continue our work to decarbonise our car fleet and support the development of new technology in buses, for example. We also have the biggest investment programme in the railways since the steam age. Labour has no ideas, and just wants to go to war with the motorist.

T8. [911350] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome the consultation on a bored tunnel under junction 10 of the M42, which was announced in last week's HS2 route refinement document, but it includes a new permanent maintenance facility in the village of Austrey. What steps can the Minister take to reduce the impact of that facility on the community, who are already much impacted by HS2?

Ms Ghani: I know that my hon. Friend has been a great champion of his constituency and has been liaising closely with HS2 Ltd. The infrastructure maintenance base that is proposed near Austrey is expected to have a minimal impact on the village when operational, because of its proposed location between the HS2 main line and the village. The site was also chosen because it will involve only limited movements of earth during construction. We expect HS2 Ltd to work to refine the route, to reduce environmental impacts. Where impacts are inevitable, HS2 Ltd will design plans for mitigation. Those plans are still in development and will be reported in the formal environmental statement, which will be deposited alongside the phase 2b hybrid Bill. If my hon. Friend requires a meeting so that I can flesh this out, I am more than happy to do that.

T3. [911343] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Step-free access at railway stations is still the responsibility of Network Rail, which, sadly, is not responsible to the Scottish Government. Currently, only 40 of over 350 railway stations in Scotland have step-free access. Is that not another reason why it is so important to see the devolution of Network Rail, so that this unacceptable situation can finally be resolved?

Ms Ghani: There is a £300 million step-free access programme. I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's complaint, because 73 further stations were identified in Scotland to get step-free access between 2019 and 2024.¹

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Stanford Coachworks in my constituency is a small, successful engineering business, building minibuses and luxury coaches. However, before its vehicles can be deemed roadworthy, they need to be inspected by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency. At present, the availability and frequency of tests falls well below the demand, threatening the viability of the business. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me, so that I can explain this in detail and we can see what can be done to improve the situation?

Chris Grayling: We will certainly arrange a meeting for my hon. Friend with a Minister—either me or the roads Minister—to address the issue. I should say that this does appear to be a problem in his area, rather than one that is universal around the country, but we do not want to see any business suffering as a result, and we will certainly work with him to address the problem.

T4. [911345] Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): May I ask how many doctors the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency employs, because they seem to think that they know better than my HGV drivers' doctors when it comes to removing their licences? Too often, this is impacting on the drivers' livelihoods, and it needs my intervention for the DVLA to take any notice. It should not be like that, should it?

1. [Official Report, 17 June 2019, Vol. 662, c. 1MC.]

Chris Grayling: I understand the point the hon. Lady is making because I have had similar issues in my own constituency. A principle that has been adopted both by her party when it was in government and by us is that, when assessing a person's medical condition, it is not right or fair to go to their own GP because of the specific relationship that exists between an individual and their GP—whether that be an assessment for welfare entitlements or an assessment for a driving licence. We will always, as a ministerial team, work with Members across the House, if there are examples of individuals who have been hard done by as a result of a decision that is wrong, to see whether we can get the situation at least reviewed.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): May I have an update on City of York Council's bid through the major road network fund for dualling the York northern ring road? Will the new roads Minister meet me to discuss this matter and the levels of congestion that are causing huge concern to my constituents?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I look forward to doing so to discuss that matter.

T5. [911346] **Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Change UK): I campaigned against a 60 foot viaduct that HS2 Ltd was planning to build through the village of Trowell to deliver HS2. I am pleased that it has abandoned that plan, but its alternative, which is a cutting that means 20 more homes will be demolished, does not solve the problem of the real economic and environmental damage that will be caused. The alternative and best way to deliver HS2, including the east midlands hub at Toton sidings, is a tunnel. Will the Secretary of State or a Minister—I do not mind who—meet me to discuss the merits of a tunnel as the best way to deliver all the benefits of HS2 to Broxtowe?

Ms Ghani: I know the right hon. Lady will use every opportunity to campaign, even through petitioning, to ensure that the voices of her constituents are heard. HS2 is committed to ensuring that it mitigates any impact and to working with local communities, but I am of course more than happy to sit down with the right hon. Lady and those from her communities to discuss this.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am delighted to see the excellent new Minister in his place. As a Northamptonshire MP, he will know the stretch of the A45 between Stanwick and Thrapston that the Government are committed to dualling. The environmental study to unlock that project was supposed to be carried out during the current roads period, but it has not yet been completed. Will he put his foot on the accelerator to make sure that that work is done to unlock this dualling?

Michael Ellis: I will very much look into this matter. It is interesting to note that Labour Front Benchers would not be supporting this environmental plan. They are the ones who are engaging in a war on the motorist. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to have a look at the A45, because I know that that road has issues. It is about time Labour accepted that this Government's investment in roads is something it should be duplicating, not resiling from.

T6. [911347] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister has previously indicated that the Government will bring forward legislation to improve the safety and regulation of the taxi trade when time allows. Can the Minister tell us when exactly that legislation will be brought before the House, or are we faced with another legislative crash—for want of a better term?

Ms Ghani: I am just as eager as the hon. Gentleman to legislate in this area, considering the amount of work done by the task and finish group. Our commitment is to make sure that standards are raised, security is dealt with and that national enforcement officers ensure that regardless of where people are in the country they are getting into a cab with a driver who has had a standardised background check and has met the threshold for safety and security. I cannot give any more detail right now, but I am pleased that so many Members are as eager as I am to legislate on this issue.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week, the all-party group on bioethanol issued its interim report on the availability of E10. This issue has been dragging on for very many years. May I urge the Minister to come to an early decision, after studying this report?

Chris Grayling: In principle, we intend to go ahead with the introduction of E10. It has to be subject to appropriate consultations. We have been particularly mindful of the impact on older vehicles, which are often owned by those on low incomes. However, it is the right thing to do, particularly given the environmental challenges we face, and we are now going through the process of moving towards its introduction.

T7. [911349] **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) about his views on the expansion of Heathrow? What steps will the Department take to prepare for a Government U-turn in that area, given that the right hon. Gentleman has committed to lying down in front of bulldozers to stop his own Government's policy?

Chris Grayling: This House voted overwhelmingly to give Heathrow airport the go-ahead for the next stage of its plans for expansion, and I expect the will of Parliament to be followed in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. If we have brief questions and brief answers, I will attempt to give everybody who is still standing the opportunity to speak.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In congratulating my Northamptonshire neighbour on his elevation to greatness as the Minister for roads, may I point out that the most important item on his desk is the introduction of civil parking enforcement in Kettering? When will a statutory instrument be introduced to implement that scheme?

Michael Ellis: I am pleased to see Northamptonshire so well represented in the Chamber, as it always is. The Department for Transport has been working with my hon. Friend on that plan regarding legal powers for civil parking enforcement in Kettering. A lot of work has been done, and more still needs to be done by Kettering Borough Council and Northamptonshire County Council, but with my hon. Friend on the case I feel sure that progress will soon be made. We are hoping that those powers will be available early in 2020.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Chris Boardman in Greater Manchester and Sarah Storey in South Yorkshire are demonstrating the value that active travel commissioners add to the promotion of cycling and walking. Although a series of initiatives helped people to get on their bikes and get out walking, we now need a long-term programme of investment. Does the Minister agree, and, if so, what plans can we expect to be brought forward?

Michael Ellis: As the hon. Gentleman knows, almost £2 billion will have been invested in cycling and walking over the course of the Parliament. Spending on cycling and walking in England has doubled from £3.50 per head to around £7 per head over this spending review period, which is as it should be. Cycling is a highly positive thing for physical fitness, mental health and wellbeing and, of course, the environment. We continue to invest in a way that the previous Government never did.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The weekend papers contained a striking photograph of £1 billion-worth of Crossrail trains sitting idly in the sidings. Some 479 drivers are not being used, which I understand costs £25 million a year, and £17 billion has been spent on Crossrail stations that currently have no trains going through them. Meanwhile, why does it take months and months to get any action from TransPennine Express in Hull to replace signs that are covered with gaffer tape? Why do we still have Pacer trains, and why was the electrification cancelled?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady will know that in the north large numbers of brand new trains are being tested and prepared for launch. She talks about new trains in London, but there are new trains in London, the north, the midlands, the south-west, the east coast main line, and the Great Western main line, as part of a massive investment by this Government in the railways and in better trains across the whole country, including her constituency.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Is it time that Transport for the North got the same powers as Transport for London—namely the ability to determine spending priorities in the region without all final decisions being made in Whitehall?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is arguing for the abolition of Transport for Greater Manchester, Nexus, and all the rest. Transport for London oversees the buses, and runs metro rail systems and its local Overground rail system. Those powers already exist in the cities of the north, and the hon. Gentleman appears to argue that those cities should lose those powers, which should be moved to Transport for the North. I do not think that is the right thing to do.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I do not know whether anyone on the Government Front Bench managed to get to the electric scooter demonstration yesterday that was provided by Bird, but such initiatives can encourage a modal shift and get people out of their cars. Will the Minister consider legislation to open up the use of electric scooters on our roads, and help us to achieve our climate change targets?

Chris Grayling: We will always look carefully at new technologies, but any new technologies introduced on and around our roads need to be safe. We need to be confident that they will continue to be safe for not only those who use them, but those around them.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I refer to the Secretary of State's response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on runway three. I will try again. Given that the Government have now followed the Opposition in committing to net zero carbon emissions by 2050, surely the Secretary of State must see that Parliament might now vote a different way on a project that emits 6 million tonnes of carbon emissions per annum and provides zero net benefit to the UK economy?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid I simply do not accept that the latter point is true. This Parliament voted, by a majority of nearly 300, to give the go-ahead to a project that I personally believe is of key strategic importance to the United Kingdom over the coming decades. I think that says it all.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Whether it is electric scooters or dockless bike schemes, technology moves so much more quickly than the Department for Transport. After years and years, will the Secretary of State finally do something about dockless bike schemes, and help our local authorities respond to the changes?

Michael Ellis: This Department leads the way internationally on transport issues and is a world leader in considering our carbon emissions, cycling, walking and active travel. The Department is a world leader in these fields.

Sudan

10.41 am

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the crisis in Sudan and ongoing human rights abuses.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The people of Sudan have shown incredible bravery and perseverance in their demands for an end to a brutal and unaccountable regime. We stand with them. The Transitional Military Council must listen to the Sudanese people and respect their legitimate demand for civilian rule.

Since the removal of Bashir on 11 April, the UK has made clear statements alongside our troika partners, the United States and Norway, as well as via the Foreign Secretary, calling for all sides to engage in an inclusive dialogue that leads to a swift and peaceful transition to civilian rule. The UK will continue to engage closely with the full spectrum of Sudanese actors, including civil society, in both Khartoum and London, to support a better future for Sudan.

We continue our call for Sudanese authorities to refrain from all violence, and for constructive dialogue that delivers a credible response to protest demands to resume. We welcome the work of the African Union in mediating, and the early progress reported towards the resumption of talks with the Forces of Freedom and Change. Following the sickening and brutal acts committed by Sudanese security forces on 3 June, I summoned the Sudanese ambassador to the Foreign Office last week, and told him in the strongest terms that these violent acts against civilians must stop.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I am very grateful to the Minister for her response. When Omar al-Bashir stood down and the Transitional Military Council took over—the Minister alluded to that—there was a huge amount of optimism. There were peaceful protests and there was space for opposition groups. Since last weekend, however, the situation has become horrendous. We have seen the Rapid Support Forces—the former Janjaweed militia—play a part in killing over 100 people. A number of women have been arrested, as have various opposition politicians, including Mohamed Esmat, and three key people from the SPLM-N—the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North.

The Minister mentioned the help she is giving to Sudanese diaspora groups here. What conversations are we having with them, and what additional assistance can we give the alliance? Will she provide more details on that? Its leaders are being arrested, and many key personnel who are abroad want to come back and need help. What efforts are the troika and Her Majesty's Government making to put pressure on countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which are apparently giving support to the Transitional Military Council?

Finally, the Minister rightly mentioned the African Union, which has a key role to play. Does she think it sensible for the AU to have suspended Sudan's membership at a time when there should be dialogue, discussion and pressure applied, and what will she and the Secretary of State do to work with the AU, which is absolutely the

key player in this, to make sure that common sense prevails, that space is given for democracy and that the will of the people triumphs in a country that has so much potential, but which is suffering so much at the moment?

Harriett Baldwin: I start by putting on the record my gratitude to my hon. Friend for his tireless advocacy on behalf of the people of Sudan, for his involvement in the all-party group on Sudan and South Sudan, and for the way he posed his question. He is absolutely right that we should also pay tribute to the tireless work of Her Majesty's Ambassador Irfan Siddiq and his team in the embassy in Khartoum. They have been working relentlessly in very difficult conditions to put forward the view of Her Majesty's Government, which is that we need to find a way of taking the inspiring activism that led to the removal of former President Bashir a few months ago, and moving forward in line with the aspirations of the Sudanese people towards civilian-led government.

My hon. Friend rightly pointed out the importance of a range of external actors and of our work with US and Norway in the troika. We are one of a group of countries that consider themselves friends of Sudan and want to play a constructive role in moving forward in this transition, which even the Forces of Freedom and Change recognise will have to be a protracted one, given that the country is coming out of a long period of direct rule by Bashir, and that the institutions and structures that we take for granted in our country take time to form in the transition to democracy. It is important therefore that there be an overall agreement, and that the sovereign council, which includes both the Transitional Military Council and civilians, be able to take things forward.

The US, Norway and the UK will work together constructively. We welcome the stance that the African Union has taken, and we fully support its envoy and the work that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed from Ethiopia has done to find a way forward. My hon. Friend also rightly points out the importance of engaging with our friends in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to ensure a smooth transition to civilian rule. The international community has been clear about the completely unacceptable behaviour of the Rapid Support Forces; we deplore the terrible atrocities committed. We will set out the potential rewards of moving to civilian rule and make sure that people understand the tools we have to sanction those who do not play a constructive role in that transition.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The constant protest in Sudan since last December resulted in President Bashir being removed from power by the military on 11 April and the council of generals assuming power. The Transitional Military Council has since been in negotiations with protesters about establishing a civilian-led Government. On 15 May, it agreed to a three-year transition period to civilian rule, but that changed on 3 June, when, fearing they had ceded too much power to the protesters, Sudanese paramilitary forces launched a violent crackdown. Since then, much of the country has been shut down by a three-day strike.

The African Union has rightly suspended Sudan from its membership until a civilian-led transitional authority has been established, but we need further pressure placed on the Transitional Military Council to

[Liz McInnes]

continue the political transition. To that end, the Government should encourage our allies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to persuade Sudanese paramilitary forces to pull out of Khartoum and resume negotiations with protesters.

In December 2017, the former Foreign Secretary thought it wise to hold a trade forum with Sudan. We warned the Government at the time about striking trade deals with Sudan while ignoring the country's human rights abuses, but they did not listen. The Government really need to get their priorities in order. Instead of constantly searching for new trade deals, we need to be prioritising human rights. I therefore ask the Minister to ensure that her Government call for an outside-led investigation into the killing of protesters, halt all deportations and removals to Sudan, support real regime change and ultimately use their diplomatic clout to ensure a peaceful transition to civilian rule in Sudan.

Harriett Baldwin: I assure the hon. Lady that we are using every diplomatic avenue that we can to seek to ensure that the uprising leads to a smooth transition to civilian rule. We are certainly not holding back on condemning the behaviour that we have seen from the Rapid Support Forces.

The hon. Lady mentions the important role that we can play in other forums. I can confirm that on Monday I will be in Luxembourg with other European Union Foreign Ministers to talk about the situation in Sudan, and to see what we can do on the strategy that I outlined, which is to show the clear upside for the economy of a smooth transition to civilian rule. I am sure that she would recognise that part of the clear upside has to be economic reform and the ability to start doing more business with Sudanese businesses, and that that is an important part of the transition.

In addition, we welcome the fact that the US has appointed a special envoy. We have our special envoy, Bob Fairweather, and the US has just announced that its special envoy is Ambassador Donald Booth, who is in Sudan today with American Assistant Secretary Tibor Nagy. Again, this is about reiterating our points about the importance of the smooth transition to civilian rule, and how that can unlock economic reforms and Sudan's economic potential.

The hon. Lady rightly welcomes the constructive role being played by the African Union, which has sent very clear messages. She rightly says that these kinds of human rights violations and abuses absolutely need to be clearly documented. We have heard very disturbing reports, not only in Khartoum, but in Darfur. They are as yet unconfirmed, but through our diplomatic channels at the United Nations, we have again urged the UNAMID—United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur—peacekeeping mission to fully investigate them. She is absolutely right to say that these kinds of atrocities are not things that the world will forget, and that it will look to hold accountable those who have committed them.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I welcome the appointment of the US special envoy; that role has been left unfilled for too long. In September I was in Sudan, and I noticed a certain contempt—which continues—from the ruling elite towards more distant

organisations, whether that was the US, Norway, the UK, the UN or, to a lesser degree, the AU. However, I did notice that the ruling elite took note of what was said by their near neighbours in particular. What leverage do we have, particularly through our foreign aid relationships with those near neighbours, that we can use to put pressure on for a peaceful solution? As part of our international aid programme, we are providing some £85 million of support to enable people to feed their families. As always with our humanitarian assistance, it needs to be predicated on need, rather than tied to any specific political act.

Separately, on the political track, we need to keep making clear statements about the potential upside for the Sudanese economy of following a path for reform—the upside that could exist if Sudan were to move out of being classified by the United States as effectively a state sponsor of terrorism. So there is a clear path that can be followed to a much better future for the Sudanese people. We encourage all actors, neighbours and the international community to work with the Sudanese people to achieve that.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): In the past 10 days, at least 124 people have been killed by the regime forces and more than 700 have been injured, as protests have steadily engulfed Khartoum. We have also had widespread reports of sexual violence, mass arrests, gunfire in medical facilities and bodies floating in the River Nile.

The SNP follows the EU in calling on the Sudanese Government to release all journalists, members of the Opposition, human rights defenders and other protesters arbitrarily detained, and to conduct a thorough investigation into recent deaths and human rights abuses. I welcome the Minister's statement and I note that she is going to Luxembourg on Monday to meet EU partners. Does she agree that a multilateral approach through such institutions as the EU is the most effective way to exert international pressure and to ensure that human rights are respected? If so, what conversations has she had with her European counterparts about the most effective means to do so?

Does the Minister agree that we are watching Sudanese society teeter on the brink of large-scale violence and potential civil war? What lessons has she learned in her Department from Myanmar that will help to avoid a similar situation?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman will have heard about the way in which we are engaging with our EU counterparts on this. We talked about near neighbours, but of course Sudan is very close to all of us, so it is important that we find a way to facilitate the smooth transition to civilian government.

The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the terrible atrocities on 3 June that led to my summoning the Sudanese ambassador. This morning's reports from our post on the ground state that there has been a continued reduction in the Rapid Support Forces present on the streets of Khartoum; that talks are continuing to take place, facilitated by mediators; and that African Union envoy Labat and Ethiopian envoy Dirir are playing a constructive role in moving those forward. So I think that we can welcome the international engagement, but we can also welcome the fact that, through this mediation

by the African Union, there has been a de-escalation of the totally unacceptable behaviour of 3 June by the Rapid Support Forces.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Thank you for granting this important urgent question this morning, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Britain, as the Minister so rightly says, has a pivotal role to play as a member of the Troika, along with Norway and the United States, as it has for many years. And this House too—Jo Cox, our late colleague, and I worked on the atrocities in Darfur for many years, both when I was in opposition and when I was Secretary of State.

The critical point that Britain can make at this time is that there will be no impunity for the human rights abusers in the regime in Sudan who are conducting the most appalling events in Sudan—in Khartoum and elsewhere—in respect of civil society, which is trying to move Sudan to a better place. I refer not just to the appalling events that have taken place through militias such as the Janjaweed in Darfur; President George Bush referred to events there as a genocide and General Bashir must be held to account by the International Criminal Court. There is also the fact that the human rights abusers in the forces in Khartoum can be held to account today through mobile phone technology. There are many pictures of individuals who have been abusing the human rights of citizens in Khartoum and Britain should make the point that they will all be held to account in due course, no matter how long it takes.

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his work at the time of the last Darfur crisis, and, of course, to our late lamented colleague Jo Cox, who made such an impact on the world's attention to this situation.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: we must not lose track of accountability, particularly that of state security forces when there are documented human rights violations. As I said, we are hearing that there are a number of unconfirmed reports and that there is also evidence on mobile phones. We think that that is one of the reasons the internet has been shut down, and has continued to be shut down. As he will appreciate, that makes it difficult to confirm what has happened. That is why we have taken steps to go via the United Nations peacekeeping mission and called on that mission to get to the bottom of what has happened and of who has been responsible, so that they can be held accountable for these atrocities.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The announcement by special envoy Mahmoud Dirir that talks may resume is of course welcome, but I want to focus on the point raised by the former International Development Secretary, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). The terrible violence has an awfully familiar ring to those of us who had to deal with the tragedy in Darfur, because the traditional response of the Sudanese state is to deploy forces to crack down on those whom they wish to oppose.

There has been such a considerable difference between assessments of the number of people killed. I think the authorities claim that it is about 61, but, as we have heard, according to reports from other sources, including doctors, it is double that. There have also been reports of rape, and of bodies being thrown into the Nile. Did I understand the Minister to say that she thought that

UNAMID could play a role in investigating all these atrocities, including those in Khartoum? If that is the case, and if there is support from both the African Union—which plays a very important role—and the United Nations, I think the whole House would support it as well, because we need the evidence to hold people to account. The tragedy in Sudan and Darfur is that far too many people have got away with far too much.

Harriett Baldwin: Let me clarify what I said. We believe that in Darfur, where the reports have been hard to confirm, UNAMID can have an important role in trying to get to the bottom of what has happened and ensuring that justice is served. In Khartoum itself there is also work to be done in terms of documentation, but my understanding is that no forces from UNAMID have been deployed there. Part of the evidentiary process relating to these atrocities will require us to try to get to the bottom of some of the documentation on people's mobile phones. However, it is on the agenda of all the players, including international players, to find the best way of ensuring that we do not lose sight of the fact that these abuses must be met with justice, whether they are violations by the security forces or abuses by others,

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Along with other Members who are present today, I visited Sudan last year. It was my fourth visit. The plea of the ordinary Sudanese is "Please do not forget us and please hear our cries when we really do need help." They need help at the moment.

Our ambassador has been called in for a dressing down. Can the Minister assure me that our staff in Sudan are given maximum protection, because that is a worrying development?

I ask for two things. I share what my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said. May we have an absolute assurance that the Minister will talk to the Home Office to make sure there are no deportations back to Sudan at the moment? That is the one thing the large diaspora here will want to hear.

The most worrying thing we found out from our visit last year was the rapid rundown of UNAMID. Can we stop that? Can we make sure we invest in UNAMID and get people back on the ground? That is the only way we will stop a dangerous escalation of all sorts of conflict in Darfur.

Harriett Baldwin: First, I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's strong interest in this area. I answer a lot of the written parliamentary questions that he tables. I want to put on record for the people of Sudan that of course Her Majesty's Government will not lose sight of the issues and what is happening and they will remain at the forefront of our minds. The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the bravery of our ambassador and the team. This is the second time that we have drawn down our embassy staff to the minimum. I assure colleagues that of course we make sure that they are protected in the way that they need to be, but we have asked non-essential staff and families to leave and we have updated our travel advice for any British citizens thinking of travelling to Khartoum or Sudan more widely.

In terms of Darfur and UNAMID, I can say to the House that the decision last year to draw down troops has been implemented. That has been a fairly modest drawdown. There will be no further drawdown. Under the

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

current circumstances it is important that that presence remain in place and we remain committed to being a partner supporting that deployment at this time.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The Minister has been giving very thorough answers to the questions. That is my polite way of saying it would be helpful if she could perhaps be a little briefer as we proceed.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): May I press the Minister on what she said in relation to UNAMID? There is significant evidence of continuing human rights abuses in Darfur. There is emerging evidence that the RSF has occupied bases that the African Union and the UN have left. There is a vote at the end of this month at the AU and the UN about a further significant diminishing of the UNAMID operation. Will the UK absolutely oppose any further withdrawal or drawdown because it is the last remaining safeguard for the civilian population there and if it is drawn down further we will hand complete control to the human rights abusers?

Harriett Baldwin: In the interests of brevity, Madam Deputy Speaker, I confirm that the UK position is that there should be no further drawdown.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Sudan finds itself sixth in the Open Doors world watch list for persecution of Christians and we know that the 2 million Christians there are subjected to extreme persecution, in particular in the Nuba mountains where thousands of Christians have been slaughtered and displaced, so this is a serious issue. Will the Minister consider the calls from Christian Solidarity Worldwide to convene a special session of the UN Human Rights Council on that issue?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Foreign Secretary's prioritisation of freedom of religion and belief in his work, and my colleague from the other place, Lord Tariq Ahmad, was in Khartoum last year making precisely this point.

The hon. Gentleman makes a very sensible point about the Human Rights Council. He will be aware that we tried to raise this at the Security Council last week but it was blocked by Russia and China. However, we will of course explore all international avenues to make sure that we keep this issue on the agenda.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Cardiff has a strong and long-standing Sudanese community and many concerns have been raised with me by constituents who are also deeply worried about friends and relatives whom they are unable to contact because of the cutting off of the internet and communications. As the two former International Development Secretaries have said, unfortunately, cutting off information and using brutal tactics against civilians are par for the course for the Sudanese military and security forces. Given what the Minister said about UNAMID, what other methods can be used to verify what on earth has gone on, because I have heard horrific stories from individuals? Are we talking about the involvement of

the International Committee of the Red Cross or other independent human rights monitors if UNAMID and other forces are not going to be in Khartoum and elsewhere? What message does she have for countries that continue to provide the Sudanese military and security forces with direct assistance, given their horrific record of abuse of civilians?

Harriett Baldwin: To the hon. Gentleman's latter point, we believe it is important to raise those concerns with the relevant countries at the earliest possible opportunity, and I can assure him that we will be doing that. With regard to the documentation and the closing down of the internet, he makes some sensible suggestions on the ways in which we must try to ensure that we continue to be able to hold people to account for their actions, and I look forward to updating the House about the actions we have taken in that area.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Despite the telecommunications blackout, we have heard that the UN has had reports that 19 children have been murdered and that 49 or so are believed to have been injured, some of whom have been sexually assaulted. On that specific point, will the Minister tell us what the Government can do to press for the protection of the most vulnerable, including children, during the horrific violence that they are seeing in their country?

Harriett Baldwin: As far as Darfur is concerned, the crucial organisation there is UNAMID. With regard to Khartoum, the important way forward there is to ensure that the Transitional Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change are able to continue with the current dialogue and that they recognise that peaceful protest needs to be part of this transition. We will try to ensure that all abuses and violations are documented and that people are held to account.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The last I heard, the brave men and women working in international aid agencies such as the International Rescue Committee were still operating on the ground. Are we in contact with those organisations, and what are they reporting back? It is encouraging to hear that European Ministers are meeting to talk, so would not a new delegation be timely if that could be arranged at this time?

Harriett Baldwin: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. A few days ago, I met some of the leading non-governmental organisations that are delivering humanitarian assistance, and access is continuing to allow them to do that. Obviously one has to put on record one's admiration for the bravery of the people involved. As far as a delegation is concerned, I understand that commercial flights from both Ethiopian Airlines and Turkish Airlines have now restarted. We hope that the situation will remain peaceful enough on the ground to enable us to update our travel advice, but at the moment the travel advice for British citizens is for essential travel only.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance, as ever, goes to Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to speak in this House, whatever time it may be—either first or last, it doesn't matter.

Could the Minister outline the practical steps that she has been taking, as well as the statements that have been issued, to help to provide safety and security for those who are peacefully protesting? What discussions has her office had recently to attempt to lever diplomatic pressure—to prevent the killings, the abuse of protesters and the horrific sexual abuse of some women—on a Government who are downright refusing to meet the basic human rights of their people?

Harriett Baldwin: I would like to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman but, in the interest of brevity, I must tell him that many of those points were covered in my earlier answers. Our travel advice for British citizens is kept constantly updated, and at the moment our travel advice is for essential travel only.

Local Housing Allowance: Supreme Court Ruling

11.14 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on yesterday's Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Samuels v. Birmingham City Council* and the impact it will have on the Department's setting of local housing allowance rates.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The ruling was not against the Department; it was a case against Birmingham City Council. I will look at the judgment carefully. The Court decided that the local authority had used the wrong test when deciding whether accommodation is affordable. The assessment is needed when deciding whether someone has made themselves intentionally homeless.

The decision is primarily one for local authorities to consider with regard to how they deal with applications for unintentional homelessness. However, I will undertake to consider the implications fully with my Department. LHA rates are not intended to meet full rental costs in all areas. The intention behind the welfare reform programme is that the same considerations and choices faced by people not in receipt of benefits should also face those claiming benefits. The LHA policy is designed to make the system fairer for all to achieve that.

The Government recognise, however, that the impact of freezing LHA rates may have different effects across the country, with rents in some areas increasing at different rates. In view of that, a proportion of the savings from the freeze to LHA rates is used to create targeted affordability funding. That funding is being used to increase those LHA rates that have diverged the most from local rents.

Marsha De Cordova: I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting the urgent question.

Yesterday, the Supreme Court ruled on the case of *Samuels v. Birmingham City Council*, a case in which a single mother with four children was found “intentionally homeless” for not using her subsistence social security to pay the shortfall between her local housing allowance and her rent. Since 2016, the Government have frozen LHA, while private rents have continued to rise. That has meant that housing benefits no longer cover the cost of renting in the private sector.

Research by Shelter has found that for a two-bedroom home, even for the cheapest third of rents, LHA rates do not cover rental costs in 97% of areas in England. In the case that the Supreme Court ruled on yesterday, Ms Samuels was expected to use her social security to find an additional £150 a month to top up her local housing allowance to cover her rent. That put Ms Samuels in an impossible situation, essentially forcing her to choose between housing her family and feeding them. That is happening in the context of local authorities being forced to spend £1 billion a year on emergency and temporary accommodation, with the costs of preventing homelessness being pushed from national to local government.

The Government cannot continue to expect the poorest people in our society to find a way of paying for what the Government refuse to. The judgment sets a precedent.

[Marsha De Cordova]

Will the Minister make a clear statement on the Supreme Court's judgment and tell the House how the Government intend to respond? When will the Secretary of State reset LHA rates in response to the judgment? Finally, will the Minister tell us what assessment the Government have made of the hardship caused by the freeze in LHA rates?

Will Quince: The hon. Lady is right that LHA rates were frozen in the summer Budget in 2015 and have therefore been frozen since 2016. That was about getting our welfare bill under control. It was about ensuring that we provided the support necessary for those who needed it and fairness for those who pay for it, and making sure that our welfare system is sustainable in the long term. I can tell the hon. Lady that the freeze will end in March 2020. In all cases, the targeted affordability fund is available. We also have discretionary housing payments, and £1 billion has been made available since 2011.

Ultimately, it is a supply issue. LHA rates are one thing and supply is another. We need to look at successive Governments that have not built enough affordable—by which I mean council and social—housing. Nevertheless, the hon. Lady will be aware that I did a lot of work in this area before taking up my ministerial post. She would therefore expect me to undertake further work in post, and there will be more to come.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Rents in Cheltenham are relatively high. Does the Minister agree that bringing more housing on stream is critical to bringing down those rents? Does he join me in welcoming the £3 million that went to Cheltenham via the housing infrastructure fund to make what would otherwise be unviable developments viable, bringing vital housing on stream?

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is right that we are taking action to build the homes that our country needs. The LHA rate is an issue in so many cases because of supply and demand. Demand massively outstrips supply in certain areas, so I am pleased by the action that Cheltenham is taking with his support.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I pay tribute to Ms Samuels, who brought her case as far as the Supreme Court. Hopefully her struggle will result in change so that others do not have to go through this.

This case should be a wake-up call for many local authorities in how they process homelessness applications, while acknowledging that Scotland has much stronger homelessness legislation. Local authorities have been left in a very difficult situation because of this Government's policies, which drive cases like that of Ms Samuels. Local housing allowance rates have been frozen at 2015 levels by this Government. Why will that freeze continue into next year? The Minister simply cannot say that this is about not wanting to subsidise the private rented sector, because the Government are actively doing that by not building social housing.

In the four years to 2018, Scotland delivered 50% more affordable housing units per head of population and—this is the important one—five times more social rented properties per head of population, and more in total, than England. The Scottish Government are also spending

£12 million on discretionary housing payments to mitigate the Government's freeze on benefits such as local housing allowance and £50 million to mitigate the bedroom tax.

A perfect storm has led to so many of us having cases like that of Ms Samuels at our surgeries—punitive, arbitrary and punishing cuts to social security, including housing benefit, coupled with rent increases and a devastating under-supply of social housing. When will the Government wake up to the crisis they are causing?

Will Quince: Despite the freeze in Scotland, we have seen LHA rates rise. One rate rose in 2017-18, three rates rose in 2018-19 and 16 rates rose in 2019-20. The hon. Gentleman knows me well enough to know that I am looking at various options in this area ahead of potential spending review bids. The freeze comes to an end next year, and I look forward to working with him.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see the Minister in his place, which will give great reassurance to my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) that it is possible to leave the Government and rejoin at a more senior level in short order.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) hit the nail on the head. It is all about the supply of private sector housing. What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister for Housing on increasing the supply of housing and, in particular, building above shops? Whether in Birmingham, Colchester, Cheltenham or Southend, this has to be part of the solution.

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and his question. He is right that supply is a key element. Raising LHA rates would be one thing, but it will not have the impact we need if we do not build the housing that is desperately needed.

I am working closely with my counterpart at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and we are looking at supply ahead of potential spending review bids. We will be holding regular meetings to discuss these matters further.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The local housing allowance freeze is causing real hardship not just in Birmingham but across the country, and I will be raising the impact on Nottingham citizens in my Adjournment debate next Monday. Does the Minister not understand that the Government's commitment to eradicating homelessness will continue to ring very hollow while his Department continues to pursue many of the very policies that created the problem in the first place?

Will Quince: I look forward to the Adjournment debate on Monday evening, when we will discuss these matters in more detail. We want everyone to have security in their home and a roof over their head, which is why we have committed over £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. We have published a strategy to end rough sleeping by 2027 and to halve it by 2022, backed by £100 million of initial funding, and we have changed the law so that councils can place families in private rented accommodation so that they get a suitable place sooner. Statutory homelessness acceptances fell last year.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister says that the Government's aim is to get support to the people who need it and to make the system sustainable, but surely what this case underlines is that we have a welfare system that is broken and that the Government's attempts to fix it are failing. We need the welfare system repaired and we need action to tackle cases like this, along with the record numbers using food banks and a welfare system that is not doing what the Minister states is its aim.

Will Quince: I am afraid that I do not recognise the picture that the hon. Lady paints. We are spending record amounts on our welfare system—over £95 billion a year for those of working age.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that this Supreme Court judgment not only highlights the huge gap between local housing allowance rates and the reality of rents in the private sector, but shines a light on the much bigger crisis of homelessness, which today is a massive part of my caseload and, I think, that of other hon. Members? It is a crisis that in Birmingham, the month after the case went to the Supreme Court, saw 12,000 households on the council waiting list including the homeless and 2,500 households in temporary accommodation. Does he accept that this will not be tackled until the Government recognise the need to invest in social housing on the scale required and adopt social security policies that tackle poverty rather than exacerbate it and compound the homelessness problem, and that unfreezing the LHA cap would be a first step in that?

Finally, does he recognise that the message here for Birmingham City Council and other local authorities is that they must always keep focused on the people, not simply on the procedures?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman should not underestimate my determination—I chaired the all-party group on ending homelessness—to absolutely deliver on our commitments to halve and then end rough sleeping. I recognise what he says about LHA rates, but that is not the case across the country. Rates are an issue in some parts of the country but not in others, which is why I am looking at this very carefully. I have been

working with my counterparts in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as he suggests, because supply is also an issue.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The local housing allowance causes us real problems in Stroud, because we are in the same area as Gloucester, where rents are much lower. That is nothing to do with this Minister, let alone this Government or previous, successive Governments; it was a Labour Government who grouped those areas together. Will he at least take a look at the impact on those groupings where rents are higher in some areas and lower in others?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. Those groupings are based on broad rental market areas, and in some parts of the country they pose an issue. A number of Members from across the House have raised this issue with me and I am looking at it.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Under this Government we have seen the introduction of the bedroom tax and universal credit, both of which are causing rent arrears, and the Minister has actually admitted that UC delays are leading to an increase in prostitution. He says that the reason for the freeze in LHA rates, which is now making people homeless, is to stop the private rented sector being subsidised, yet another Government policy is leading to increased numbers of properties in the private rented sector. The right to buy has resulted in 75,618 sales and over 21,890 new starts since 2012, leading to a further imbalance between public and private sector housing. When will this Government get a joined-up, just social policy?

Will Quince: First, I want to correct the record. I did not make those comments at the Work and Pensions Committee yesterday, and if the hon. Gentleman checks the record he will see that that is the case. Since the freeze, LHA rates have been adjusted through targeted affordability funding, as I mentioned earlier. In addition, over £1 billion has been made available since 2011 in discretionary housing payments. I have made it clear that the freeze ends in March 2020 and, ahead of a spending review bid, I am looking at numerous options.

Business of the House

11.29 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): The business for the week commencing 17 June will include:

MONDAY 17 JUNE—Second reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill.

TUESDAY 18 JUNE—Motion to approve an ecclesiastical Measure relating to church representation and ministers, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 (Specified Scottish Authority and Barred Lists) Order 2019, followed by debate on a motion relating to progress of implementation of the recommendations of the Cox report. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 19 JUNE—Remaining stages of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill.

THURSDAY 20 JUNE—Debate on a motion on refugee family reunion, followed by a general debate on court closures and access to justice. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 21 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

Tomorrow marks two years since the devastating Grenfell Tower fire. The survivors and bereaved have endured so much with such dignity, and I know that the thoughts of the entire House will be with them at this time.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. My copy of the statement is on two pages; I wonder whether the second page is intentionally blank—we seem to have only one week's business.

I thank everyone, including the Clerks, involved in the new edition—the 25th—of “Erskine May”, which is also available online, so lots of people will be able to look it up and hold the Government to account for what they do in the Chamber.

It looks as though the Backbench Business Committee has taken control of the business next week. Will the Leader of the House consider giving us an Opposition day? It seems that the Government have gone into the cupboard—it is a bit like “Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard”. I keep thinking of nursery rhymes, what with the 10 green bottles standing on a wall in the leadership election—

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Blue bottles.

Valerie Vaz: Yes, blue bottles. The Government have gone to the cupboard, and lurking in there is the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill, which was published only yesterday but has its Second Reading on Monday.

I know that last week was the Leader of the House's first week, but he said that he would come forward with the recess dates “in due course.” Parliament and the country have no idea what is going to happen after July and in September and October. The Leader of the House must have had some discussions; will he provide a bit more clarity on when he will announce the dates for the

summer and conference recesses? This issue cannot be part of the campaign promises. The Leader of the House is Parliament's voice in Government. Parliament is not irrelevant, particularly at this time, when we have a minority Government.

One of the many governmental powers that can be exercised without statutory authority, by convention, is the Dissolution of Parliament, or Prorogation if it is the end of the Session. The sovereign acts on the advice of her Ministers. We know that the breaching of conventions is not illegal, and we are talking about a convention, but the courts can look at it. It is outrageous, morally and constitutionally, for candidates in the Tory leadership election to suggest that they will put our gracious sovereign in a position to prorogue Parliament. Will the Leader of the House rule that out today?

At least three candidates have said that the UK will leave the EU without a deal, even though Parliament has expressly voted against it. Will the Leader of the House rule that out today? He must have seen the Cabinet note warning that the country is still unprepared for leaving on 31 October. It said that we need four to five months—that is at least until November—for trader readiness, and six to eight months to ensure that adequate arrangements are in place to build stockpiles of medicines. Should we not have a debate on whether the country is actually ready for leaving on 31 October?

The candidates are saying that they will renegotiate the withdrawal agreement. Are negotiations still ongoing? Is anyone talking to the EU? May we have a statement on the current discussions with the EU? Instead, we are getting a string of policy announcements, none of which is costed, none of which has been put to the electorate, and none of which has been agreed by the Chancellor. Handouts to the highest earners, according to the Resolution Foundation, would see 83% of gains going to the richest 10% of households, with the biggest beneficiaries, as a proportion of their income, being those on £80,000. The shadow Chancellor has said that the money involved is more than we spend every year on justice or children's social care. I am pleased that the Leader of the House mentioned Grenfell, but not a single one of the candidates has said what they will do to prevent another Grenfell.

The Prime Minister said yesterday that employment figures have risen in the west midlands. I ask the Leader of the House to kindly ask the Prime Minister to correct that, because business leaders in Greater Birmingham have warned this week that stagnating employment statistics in the west midlands present a concerning picture. Unemployment fell by 0.1% between February and April, but the figures remain significantly above the national average, second only to the north-west. Why is employment stagnating in Tory Britain? May we have a debate on employment in the west midlands?

This week, the National Farmers Union organised an event at which farmers in the west midlands spoke of the terrible uncertainty of a no-deal exit and of how they need to use places such as the Netherlands to grow spinach, particularly in October when our growing season is coming to an end. May we have debate on the effect of no deal on the food and farming industry?

In Carers Week, in Tory Britain, there are around 7 million carers in the UK, 58% of whom are women. Hon. Members will have seen the display of the Multiple Sclerosis Society in the Upper Waiting Hall. One in

three people with MS are not getting the care that they need. When will the Government publish the social care Green Paper?

The Leader of the House will have heard the words of the outgoing ambassador in Singapore, who said that people outside the UK have described the UK as beset by division, obsessed with ideology, and careless of the truth. All the major investment is going to Germany and France, but, worryingly, this is what we are hearing: £350 million to the NHS, free television licences for the over-75s, trade deals are easy, no deal is better than a bad deal, and strong and stable. You cannot run a country on rhetoric. The Government may have won the vote yesterday, but we will try again for the good of the country and for our reputation in the world.

May I ask the Leader of the House to kindly join me in wishing the Opposition Chief Whip a very happy birthday, as he has worked selflessly all his life for the good of the party and for the good of the country as a Minister and in Opposition? We wish him a very happy birthday.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We all wish the Opposition Chief Whip a very happy birthday.

Mel Stride: There is only one person in this House whose birthday is more important than that of the shadow Chief Whip and that is the Chief Whip. I do not know when it is, but whenever it is I wish him a very happy birthday, too. I do not know what the shadow Chief Whip treats himself to on his birthday. Perhaps he polishes the instruments of torture in the Labour Whips' Office. *[Interruption.]* He is a softy indeed, as the shadow Leader of the House says, and I wholeheartedly concur with her best wishes to the shadow Chief Whip.

The hon. Lady raised a large number of points, which I will attempt to deal with in turn. She made reference to the blank page that she has received in the forthcoming business. That is indicative of the large amount of business that we will be bringing forward in due course to fill that page and many others. She quite accurately raised the issue of the preponderance of Back-Bench business debates that we are putting forward at the moment. That is for two reasons. One is that we want to hear and engage with Back Benchers, because, as Conservatives, we have a very inclusive style of government. Secondly, the persuasive abilities of the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) know no bounds, so if we want to see fewer of those debates, we will have to have a word with him. The hon. Lady also made a request for Opposition day debates. They are handled through the usual channels and will, of course, be considered in a sensible and measured manner.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill. That is a very important measure. The fact that we have brought it forward so quickly underlines its importance in making sure that businesses up and down the country are able to have more frequent valuations of their rates and bringing forward the first revaluation by one year to 2021.

The hon. Lady, once again and quite understandably, asked about the recess dates. I do not have an announcement to make this morning, but I will of course come back to the House with one at the earliest opportunity, and it will be for the House to pass the motion in that respect in the normal way.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of proroguing Parliament as, I think—I am paraphrasing her comments—a device, perhaps to ensure a no-deal situation in the absence of Parliament sitting. That is not the Government's policy on this at all, and it is certainly our feeling that Her Majesty the Queen should be kept out of politics; it would be unfair to draw her into a political situation in that form.

The hon. Lady made several references to no deal and the various positions of the Conservative candidates—the runners and riders in the forthcoming contest. I do not think it would be right for me to comment specifically on any of them other than to say that what does perhaps unite the whole House is that having a deal is better than having no deal, provided that we can come together to secure that outcome.

To my surprise, actually, the hon. Lady raised the issue of employment—specifically in the west midlands—on which this Government, of course, have an outstanding record. We have the highest level of employment in our history. We have the lowest level of unemployment since 1974. We have halved the level of youth unemployment since 2010. We have continued economic growth, and living standards and real wages are rising as we go forward.

Let me finish by saying that the hon. Lady and I have already struck up a good relationship. We are already seeing eye to eye on many important matters such as restoration and renewal and the work that we will jointly be engaged in on the independent complaints and grievance scheme. We both believe that Parliament must have a strong and loud voice, and of course we both believe in debate and scrutiny. So given that we agree on so much, perhaps I could quote the immortal words of the late, great Amy Winehouse:

“Why don't you come on over Valerie?”

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): We are what we remember, and what our forefathers did helps to shape the places we call home. In my home—my constituency—we remember Captain Matthew Flinders, who first charted the coast of Australia and whose body was found by chance during excavations in London recently. We want to bring him home to Donington in Lincolnshire. What ministerial statement might be made to help us in that effort, 200 years—more than that, actually—after Flinders was buried? South Holland simply wants to pay its final farewell to our master mariner.

Mel Stride: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for raising this issue. Matthew Flinders was a very great nautical man—a great explorer of Australia, in particular. Of course, my right hon. Friend and I share something in common in that we were both distinguished members of the Government Whips Office at various stages in our careers, which is probably why he has alighted on the fact that he is so good at finding out where the bodies are buried—but in this case we have established that it is somewhere near Euston station. I will do whatever I can to assist him in his quest to make sure that the remains of Matthew Flinders find their home where they should be, in Donington in his constituency.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing this thrilling instalment of non-business for next week. I also

[Pete Wishart]

wish the Labour Chief Whip a happy birthday. All he wants is for his Back Benchers to observe a three-line Whip for once.

May we have a debate about sustainable populations? Today, the cull begins in this grotesque Tory horror show as the candidates are cut down to more manageable numbers—cruel, but necessary to maintain a healthy population. This is where “Britain’s Not Got Talent” meets “I’m a Tory, Get Me Out of Here”, as they are whittled away until the coronation of “the one”.

It is almost unbelievable that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is the runaway favourite, with all his baggage of Islamophobia and misogyny. He even now wants tax cuts for the rich in England to be partly paid for by national insurance contributions from Scotland. The only good thing about his soon-to-be ascendancy is that it speeds up the whole process of Scottish independence.

After all the difficulties, may we have a debate on drugs legislation and perhaps even “draw a line” under the problems? I do not think we should be locking up these senior Tories for all their drugs indiscretions, just as I do not think we should be locking up problem drug users who have addiction disorders, mental health issues or have suffered adverse childhood experiences. They should not be locked up either, but as with so many other issues, for this Government it is, “Do as I say, not as I do.” We have a criminal justice approach to drugs that locks up the poor and allows others to stand for the post of Prime Minister.

I listened carefully to the Leader of the House, but I still hear the candidates being prepared to suspend our democracy and prorogue Parliament to get this disastrous no deal through. That is the agenda of so many Members who are standing for the post of Prime Minister. Some of them refuse to rule it out. We need to hear clearly and definitively from the Leader of the House that he is not prepared to have our democracy suspended. Who would have believed that taking back control meant suspending our democracy and this House, when they ranted and raved about mythical, undemocratic Brussels bureaucrats denying us our democracy? We know who the true democracy deniers are now.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman, as we all know, is one of the most talented musicians in the House, having been in a very fine band or two and even appeared on “Top of the Pops”. None the less, it is simply not good enough to come to this Chamber week after week and play the same old tunes—and as far as I can tell, they are all out of the ABBA playbook. Whenever he is pressing a Minister, it is “Money, Money, Money”. When he is pressing his electorate, it is always, “Take a Chance On Me”. Once again, he took the opportunity to raise his push for a second referendum, but if he continues to do that, it will not be long before we hear his version of “Waterloo”. That is about as good as it gets, I am afraid; I will be back by popular demand next week.

The hon. Gentleman asks for a debate on drug legalisation, which is a very serious subject. The House has much debated the matter in the past, but the largesse of the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) might extend to that if he feels it appropriate. The hon.

Gentleman will have heard my answer in response to the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) about prorogation.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on strengthening the law on people who are found guilty of animal cruelty? I am sure the whole House was shocked at the recent hunt where someone was found guilty of feeding fox cubs to the hounds, yet that person can still keep animals. The law should certainly be changed.

Mel Stride: May I first pay full tribute to my hon. Friend for all the extremely effective and important campaigning that he does on animal cruelty? I should point out that the Government have taken this matter extremely seriously. We have increased the maximum sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years. We have introduced CCTV coverage in slaughterhouses, and we have taken action on puppy farms and online sales of young dogs. The debate that my hon. Friend requests would perhaps be a good one for the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns: I am very pleased to be in charge of the business of the House. [Laughter.] I thank the Leader of the House for the business announcement.

Applications for estimates day debates must be submitted by tomorrow. We understand that a number of applications are being thought about or prepared, but we have not actually received any applications so far. The Backbench Business Committee will consider applications next Tuesday afternoon, and we understand that the debates will go ahead on 2 and 3 July.

May I reiterate the birthday wishes to my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), our Chief Whip? I do wish him a very happy birthday. He has been very gentle with me recently, so I am very grateful for that.

The Leader of the House has just been extolling the Government’s record on employment, but 30 local and regional newspapers across the north of England have come together to campaign on Powering Up The North. Our chamber of commerce in the north-east of England has issued a report this week saying that employment has fallen by 20,000 over the past quarter in the north-east of England and by 26,000 over the past year. Unemployment in my constituency has grown month on month, and it now stands at 7.1%. May we have a debate in Government time on the northern powerhouse and the unprecedented unification of 30 local and regional newspapers across the north of England and on the disparity in economic progress between the regions of England and the south-east?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions and for the fine work he does as the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. The House will have noted his very pertinent call for action on the estimates day debates and for applications to come through to meet tomorrow’s deadline so that those subjects can be debated in early July.

I note the hon. Gentleman’s request for a debate in Government time on the northern powerhouse. This Government are certainly extremely proud of the investment that has gone into the north. Specifically on the north-east, it has had faster productivity growth than London since 2010, and we are of course investing £600 million in infrastructure and jobs in that region.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Just two days ago, a vehicle fire severely damaged a road bridge in my constituency between Sandiacre and Long Eaton. This has resulted in the road being closed, and a long diversion through the constituency of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on roads that are already congested. Will my right hon. Friend facilitate dialogue between the Department for Transport and Derbyshire County Council to ensure that we have a rapid assessment of this bridge and see what can be done to repair it quickly, so that people can travel freely again through my constituency?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend's raising of this very specific matter is entirely indicative of the very assiduous approach she takes to her constituency matters. She is quite right to raise this issue, and I can confirm that I will do whatever I can to assist her in the approaches she is seeking to be made to the Department for Transport.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I caution the Leader of the House against trading song lyrics with my fellow colleague from MP4, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and indeed the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), not least because the preceding line to the lyric the right hon. Gentleman quoted—

“Why don't you come on over Valerie?”—

from “Valerie” is:

“Stop making a fool out of me”,

which is exactly what she will be doing here every week? And

“So I say

Thank you for the music”,

but let us stick to the business of the House.

Will the Leader of the House at the very least endorse the words of the leadership contender he is supporting this afternoon, who has said:

“Proroguing parliament in order to try to get no-deal through, I think, would be wrong for many reasons.”

Will he at least endorse that?

Mel Stride: As for the lyric

“Stop making a fool out of me”,

nobody was attempting to make a fool out of the hon. Gentleman, I can assure him.

On proroguing, I have made it very clear that the view of Government Members and of the Government is that this should not be used as a device to ensure that Parliament is absent from the decisions that may have to be made towards the end of October and, furthermore, that it would not be appropriate for Her Majesty the Queen to be drawn into those kinds of political decisions.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): GCHQ, headquartered in my constituency, is now in its centenary year. It was founded in 1919, under the then name of the Government Code and Cypher School. May we have a debate to allow hon. Members from across the House to pay tribute to the brilliant men and women who work in that organisation and who keep our country safe in an increasingly complex and dangerous world?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and within our security services there are many unsung heroes who make many sacrifices—some, indeed, make the ultimate sacrifice—for the defence and security of our country. It would be a good subject for a debate, perhaps in this case an Adjournment debate.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Mr Fearon delayed his pension for two years. He did not know, and he was not informed by the Department for Work and Pensions, that the law had changed, and that if he wanted to reclaim that backdated two years' pension in a lump sum, he could get only one year, with the second year paid in instalments over 20 years. But Mr Fearon does not have 20 years. He has lung cancer and has had his last session of palliative chemotherapy. He has lost out on a year of his pension for which he worked all his life. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the effect of those pension changes on people who are terminally ill, and will he go in to bat for Mr Fearon?

Mel Stride: I cannot comment on a specific case, but given the terms with which the hon. Lady presented it, I recognise that it perhaps needs to be looked at rather urgently. I would be happy to facilitate whatever approaches can be made in that respect to the Department for Work and Pensions, and if she would like to write or speak to me after business questions, perhaps we could work out the best way to do so.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): May we have a debate on police pension sharing arrangements after divorce, which I believe to be a genuine scandal? One of my constituents has lost tens of thousands of pounds—roughly a quarter of his pension—because the part of his pension that was supposed to be paid to his ex-wife is not being paid to anybody and is being pocketed by the Treasury as a result of decisions made several decades ago. I think that is a genuine scandal, and I wonder whether we could debate it in this House.

Mel Stride: In the first instance, it might be worth my hon. Friend writing to me with the details of that case, so that I can ensure appropriate discussions with Ministers at the Treasury or the Department for Work and Pensions.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is shocking that hundreds of people each year are sent to prison for non-payment of council tax, often because the law is wrongly interpreted by magistrates, and the issue affects the most vulnerable and often the poorest people in our society. Chris Daw QC has started an e-petition, calling on the Government to change the law. This requires just a tiny change to the law, so may we have a debate in Government time so that we can sort out this terrible injustice?

Mel Stride: I think that I can offer the hon. Gentleman something a little more useful than a debate, because if he has specific ideas about how what he expressed as a relatively modest change to the law might make a big difference in this area, I would be interested in discussing that with him and putting those ideas to the relevant Ministers.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): On 22 June, I shall again have the honour of opening the Droitwich Spa food and drink festival, which for many

[Nigel Huddleston]

years has been led by an inspiring man called Patrick Davis, who will be standing down this year from those responsibilities. May we have a debate to celebrate the many food and drink festivals, boat festivals, heritage events, plum festivals and a whole host of things that happen right across the country, to celebrate our food and drink, our heritage and our culture, and to show our thanks to the many people who do so much to make that happen?

Mel Stride: I echo everything that my hon. Friend has said about the Droitwich Spa food and drink festival, and if I am in that area at the appropriate time I would very much look forward to attending it. Curiously, somebody on the Front Bench told me that my hon. Friend's favourite food is asparagus—I do not know the relevance of that, but I am sure there will be plenty of it at the food fair.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Despite being part of Lloyds Banking Group, the Halifax, which is predominantly located in England, offers more competitive products to customers across the board than the Bank of Scotland, which is almost solely based in Scotland. There is only one Bank of Scotland branch in England, but there are three branches of Halifax in Scotland, which shows clear geographical discrimination against consumers in Scotland and is deeply unfair. Will the Leader of the House make a statement and say whether he agrees that that is unfair? Does he agree that Lloyds Banking Group should apologise and offer all customers the best deals, regardless of where they live in the UK?

Mel Stride: Clearly, I do not know all the specifics of the matter the hon. Lady brings before the House. However, we do have Scotland questions on Wednesday 19 June, and that might be a good opportunity to ventilate the issue.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I know we are all concerned about ending poverty pay. Yesterday, I was among a group of MPs who met care workers from AFG—the Alternative Futures Group—who are being paid below the minimum wage because of cuts to sleepover rates.

Closer to home, staff employed by Interserve at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are on strike in a dispute over pay and terms and conditions. The Government really should be concerned to learn that these hard-working staff, one of whom was awarded an MBE in the recent honours list for his years of work in the Department, are being paid less than they should be. Food banks have had to be set up to support these workers, who are currently in dispute. May I urge the Leader of the House to ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement as a matter of some urgency, agree to bring this contract back in-house, treat these workers with the dignity they deserve, and ensure poverty pay is well and truly ended?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. More generally, there has been growth in real pay for over a year, thanks to our economic policies. Of course, it was this party and this Government who brought in the national living wage, which was increased well above the rate of inflation at the beginning of this financial year.

With regard to the specific issue and the strike that he raises, I would be very happy, if he wants to write to me, to facilitate a meeting with the relevant Minister. I also point him to Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on Tuesday 25 June.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Earlier this week, it was revealed that Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust continues to burn thousands of tonnes of coal to heat its buildings at City Hospital, despite promising residents two years ago that the 50-year-old boiler would be shut down permanently. The hospital is blaming the Treasury for the delay, but frankly that is no comfort to the visitors, staff, patients and local people whose health is damaged by air pollution. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care—I guess he may have more time on his hands after today—on how he intends to end this shameful situation?

Mel Stride: On the general point about coal, this Government's green policies led to the longest extended period of our not having to use coal for power generation in our history, but in Cumbria a Labour council is seeking to reopen a coalmine. We take this issue extremely seriously. On the specific matter of Nottingham hospitals and air pollution, if the hon. Lady would like to write to me, I will make sure the relevant Minister engages with her in an appropriate manner.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the privatisation of visa processing? My Swinton constituent Jack McGruer wants his fiancé Sarah to come over from Brazil, but due to a breakdown between the Home Office and VFS Global, they find themselves in limbo. Will the Leader of the House use his good offices to help me intervene with the Home Office, and try to get them out of limbo and back together in the UK?

Mel Stride: I would be very happy to do so.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It has been widely known for some time that the Ministry of Defence, for reasons best known to itself, is planning to hand over the MOD fire and rescue service to Capita. There has been no statement and no indication of what lies behind the process or this decision. Will the Secretary of State at least come to the House and make a statement on why the MOD is planning to hand over this valued service to Capita to prop up that company?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises a very specific point, so I think the best way to move forward would be for him to write to me. I will then be very happy to take up the matter with Ministers.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Following on from the question by the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and his reference to newspapers in the north, including *The Yorkshire Post* and the *Hull Daily Mail*, campaigning on Powering Up The North, on 23 June it will be five years since the then Chancellor George Osborne launched the northern powerhouse. I would like to echo the Chair's request for a debate on what progress has actually been made in closing the gap between the north and London and the south-east, on giving the north real devolved powers to drive change and not just have talking shops, and on

whether it is time to regenerate the Humber docklands in the same way and with the same impetus as the London docklands were regenerated over 40 years ago.

Mel Stride: This is the second question calling for a debate on the northern powerhouse. As I said in answer to the first, I think it is a very good idea. We should collectively across the House, depending on the routes available, think about having such a debate, principally, from the Government's point of view, because we feel we have made a substantial commitment to the north of England. We have had unprecedented investment in better transport across the north, as the hon. Lady will know, with £13 billion of investment so far—a record level—and further planned investment to come.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Dozens of my young constituents attend the Buchanan and St Ambrose High School campus in nearby Coatbridge. There has been much concern about the health of children attending the school since reports of teachers falling ill with the same type of cancer, and one boy with autism going blind, reportedly due to arsenic poisoning. Given that the site the school is built on is a former landfill that included arsenic, I am very grateful to the Scottish Government for having instituted an inquiry into this matter, following representations from Fulton MacGregor and Alex Neil, but I hope that the parents are involved at an early stage. Will the Leader of the House bring about a debate on building public buildings, including schools, on former landfill sites, so that we can get to the bottom of this?

Mel Stride: What the hon. Gentleman describes is obviously of considerable concern. I am pleased there is an inquiry, as he has set out, and I would certainly recommend that he raise the matter at Scottish questions on 19 June.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Last weekend, another unauthorised encampment was set up in Newport, this time on Beechwood Park, causing huge frustration and cost for residents, local authorities and the police. The Government have recently consulted on extra powers for local authorities and the police to deal with such circumstances, so may we have a quick update from Ministers on giving our authorities the powers they need?

Mel Stride: That would be a very good question to ask on Monday 17 June at Housing, Communities and Local Government questions.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May we have a statement or debate on the actions of the Home Office contractor Serco, which yesterday announced that it will go ahead with 300 lock-change evictions of asylum seekers before its contract ends in September? Does the Leader of the House recognise the anger and disgust of many Glaswegians at the actions of Serco, and does he agree that the Home Office should instruct Serco to halt that policy, especially given that there are live legal proceedings brought by a Glasgow South West constituent, who is appealing this decision in the Inner House of the Court of Session?

Mel Stride: I believe the hon. Gentleman tabled an urgent question on this matter that was not granted, so I recognise how important it is to him. If he writes to me in more detail, I will make sure that appropriate Ministers are engaged on it.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Madam Deputy Speaker, I warn you and everyone else that I am about to use the C-word. It is 203 sleeps until Christmas, which most people of course will welcome, but it is also 140 days before we are due to leave the European Union without a deal, which business certainly does not want, and for which there is no majority in this place or the country. Unfortunately, Labour Front Benchers were unable yesterday to deliver enough votes from their own MPs to begin the process of stopping us crashing out of the EU without a deal. The Leader of the House, who is a good man and will always do his best, has said that the Government take the view that Parliament should not be prorogued by whoever is our next Prime Minister, to the exclusion of Parliament, so that we crash out without a deal—so the Government apparently think that would be the wrong thing for any future Prime Minister to do. What will he do to ensure that Parliament takes control of the process, and that we do not leave without a deal at the end of October because of an irresponsible Prime Minister?

Mel Stride: The Government's future position will of course be determined by a new Prime Minister, but I feel confident, from all I have heard from those putting themselves forward for that position, that all of them recognise that a deal is the best way forward. The answer to the right hon. Lady's question, I think, is that the best, most secure, most sensible and rational way forward for us as a Parliament is to come together and support a deal with the European Union.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Scott Glynn of Tranent in East Lothian, who was awarded an MBE in Her Majesty's birthday honours list? Since 2013, the Walk With Scott Foundation has raised over £300,000 for local communities and charities, but more importantly Scott brings people together to chat, talk and make new friends. May we have a debate on the role of volunteers in keeping our societies strong, safe and together?

Mel Stride: A short while ago, of course, we had a very good debate on the voluntary sector. I recognise its utter importance and, like the hon. Gentleman, I salute all that it does. I echo his remarks and congratulate Scott Glynn on his well deserved MBE.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am assisting a veteran's widow who is living on the breadline in Bosnia, on an armed forces pension. She loses a significant proportion of her pension due to a steep service charge for processing her cheque, and she has to receive a cheque because the UK cannot transfer funds electronically to Bosnia. Will the Leader of the House ask his former colleagues in the Treasury to find a way to ensure that she and others like her are not penalised, and to make a statement setting out the solution to the problem?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific matter regarding the use of cheques to pay pensions. I would be very happy to take that up—perhaps in conjunction with him, if he writes to me—with the relevant Minister at the Treasury.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Government stated in answer to my written question that they do not collect centrally the figures for spending

[Stephanie Peacock]

on veterans' support services by region. May we have a Government statement to determine where money is spent on supporting veterans who have served their country?

Mel Stride: I do not have sight of the precise presentation of those statistics at this moment. However, if the hon. Lady dropped me a line about that, I would be very happy to take it up, see what the situation is and discuss with Ministers whether this might be done slightly differently or on a more disaggregated basis, as she suggests.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a statement, or indeed, a Government U-turn, on TV licences, so that over 3 million pensioners continue to receive free TV licences?

Mel Stride: There has actually been a statement on free TV licences, which will be—[*Interruption.*] It may have been an urgent question, but I refer the hon. Gentleman to that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I again welcome the news that Asia Bibi has been relocated to Canada after being falsely accused of blasphemy in Pakistan. Unfortunately, the blasphemy laws are still in place, and are still being used to persecute religious minorities. In fact, the very cell that held Asia Bibi is now occupied by Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Masih, two Christians also falsely accused of blasphemy. Worse still, in February, upon hearing that four women had been accused of blasphemy, an angry mob attacked a Christian village, leading to the displacement of approximately 200 Christian families. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this very important issue?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this extremely important matter. We welcome reports that Asia Bibi has been able to travel freely and can now make decisions about her future. We are very concerned about the persecution of members of all religious minorities and the misuse of the blasphemy law, which is why in December, the Foreign Secretary announced an independent review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office support for persecuted Christians overseas. As to a debate, this would be an excellent subject for, perhaps, an Adjournment debate.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The consumer safety Minister—the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst)—has finally told Whirlpool

UK that she intends to order the recall of at least half a million of its dangerous tumble dryers, responsible for hundreds of fires in homes across the UK. Whirlpool has until tomorrow to respond. May we have a statement on Monday, so that the Government can say, after four years of inaction on the worst consumer safety crisis of modern times, how they intend to proceed?

Mel Stride: On the face of it, there is clearly a very serious issue here, which has been highlighted in the past. It is very good that the Minister has intervened in this way to make sure that action will be taken.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On the day of the European elections, my constituent, Christine Fletcher, had to rush her unwell daughter to hospital for a brain scan. Christine could not then get a proxy vote, because she was not the person who was incapacitated by the medical emergency, yet as far back as 2015 the Electoral Commission recommended an extension of the grounds for proxy voting to cover such circumstances. May we get a Government statement on when they will adopt such a sensible, simple measure, so that people such as Christine do not have additional stress when they are dealing with an already stressful situation?

Mel Stride: The best place that I can direct the hon. Gentleman to is questions to the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, which are on 20 June.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I have had complaints from two of my smaller charities about a letter that they received from the noble Lord Pickles on behalf of *The Parliamentary Review*, asking them to take part in a competition by submitting 1,000 words on what a worthy charity is. The only problem is that they are then asked to cough up £950 for what they wrote to appear online, and £2,800 for it to be in print. Does the Leader of the House think that it is appropriate for people to trade on the name of Parliament? And might he just have a quiet word with the noble Lord, and all the other great and good people who put their name to this scheme?

Mel Stride: I do not know the details of the matter to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but on the basis of what he has said on the Floor of the House, I would like to know a bit more about it. If he were to write to me, I would be very happy to look into the matter.

Hong Kong

12.17 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):

The proposed changes to Hong Kong's extradition laws have understandably caused grave concern in Parliament and across the country. Already this week I have responded to an urgent question and an Adjournment debate on the issue. I should now like to update the House on the latest developments.

Overnight on 11 June, thousands of mainly young protesters blocked the roads around the Hong Kong central Government offices and the Legislative Council complex. There have also been violent exchanges between protesters and police. I appreciate that these scenes will have shocked many Members of the House and many millions of our constituents, and I should like to take this opportunity to appeal again for calm and considered dialogue.

Freedoms of association, speech and expression are all guaranteed by the joint declaration signed in 1984 by the Government of the People's Republic of China and the United Kingdom and enshrined in the Hong Kong Basic Law. I am sure that the House will join me in expressing grave concern at the violence that has occurred. It is imperative not only that any protests are conducted in a peaceful manner, but that the authorities' response is proportionate.

Despite the violence that occurred yesterday—I should report that since that time, there has mercifully been calm in the vicinity of the Hong Kong buildings to which I referred—it is important to recognise the unprecedented and overwhelmingly peaceful expression of public opposition that we saw at the march on 9 June, with families, church groups, business owners and professional associations all well represented. This was one of the largest single demonstrations of public concern in Hong Kong since the handover in July 1997.

There can be no doubt that the strength of public feeling in Hong Kong is profound about the proposed changes to Hong Kong's extradition laws, and of course their broader implications. As the Foreign Secretary made clear in his statement yesterday, we urge the Hong Kong Government, even at this late stage, to heed those concerns and to engage in meaningful dialogue with local and international stakeholders. Now is surely the time to pause to reflect upon the impact of these controversial proposals. It is vital that the measures are subject to full legislative scrutiny and that the Hong Kong Government give proper consideration to all alternative proposals.

The proposed Bill had been due for a Second Reading on 12 June. However, the planned debate has been postponed until further notice owing to the protests. A vote on the proposals was due on 20 June. It is not clear yet whether the protests will affect that timetable.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will already be aware that the UK Government are fully engaged on this issue. I spoke on Monday about some of the actions we have already taken, including the Foreign Secretary's joint statement with his Canadian counterpart on 30 May, the British consul general's statements locally, and our engagement with all levels of the Hong Kong Government, including the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, herself. In all these contacts we have reiterated our message of

allowing time for proper consultation, and for adequate safeguards to be included in any legislation to address key human rights concerns.

In addition to the Foreign Secretary's statement yesterday, in which he called upon the Hong Kong Government to listen to the concerns of the people and to take steps to preserve Hong Kong's rights and freedoms and its high degree of autonomy, he also made those concerns clear directly to the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam. We shall continue to engage the Hong Kong Government on this critical issue and to raise our concerns with the Chinese Government, reiterating the fundamental importance of upholding the Sino-British joint declaration.

The British consul general to Hong Kong, Andy Heyn, most recently discussed developments in Hong Kong, including the extradition proposals, with the Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing in April 2019. I have been in very close contact with him in recent days.

I note that the Chinese ambassador to London commented on the BBC's "Newsnight" programme last night that the joint declaration is, as he put it, an "historic document" that has "completed its mission". Once again I strongly disagree. The joint declaration remains as valid today as it was when it was signed over 35 years ago. That joint declaration is a legally binding international treaty, registered with the United Nations. Its objectives clearly apply to both of its signatories—the Government of the People's Republic of China and the UK. It remains in force, and it remains acutely relevant to the conduct of day-to-day life in Hong Kong. We expect China to abide by its obligations.

I should make it clear that we do not believe that the proposed changes to the extradition laws in themselves breach the joint declaration, as the treaty is silent on matters of extradition. However, we are concerned that the proposals, as currently framed, risk leaving the extradition process open to political interference. That could, of course, in future undermine Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms, guaranteed in the joint declaration, that are of course central to its continued success. Those concerns are heightened by the knowledge that the court system in mainland China lacks many of the judicial safeguards that exist in Hong Kong. We remain concerned about the continuing detention and trials of human rights lawyers and defenders, and the lack of due process and judicial transparency within mainland China. There is, of course, alarm at the prospect that fear of politically motivated extradition to China could cause a chilling effect on Hong Kong's rights and freedoms, and more insidiously might result in increasing self-censorship.

Hong Kong matters hugely to the United Kingdom, not only because of our shared history. There are some 300,000 UK citizens living there, and many more travel to and through Hong Kong every year. Hong Kong is one of the most thriving, exciting, dynamic cities in the world. It retains its distinctive identity, both within China and internationally. It is, of course, a global financial centre and serves as a gateway to one of the biggest markets in the world.

We remain committed to strengthening our rich and wide-ranging relationship with Hong Kong. We shall continue to work together as partners in support of global free trade, and we shall continue to develop our

[Mark Field]

bilateral trade links with Hong Kong. However, it is also vital for Hong Kong's continuing success that one country, two systems is fully protected, and that the rights and freedoms that make Hong Kong such a prosperous city are safeguarded.

I once again call on the Hong Kong Government to pause, to reflect and to take meaningful steps to address the concerns of the people, businesses, the legal professionals, judges and the international community about the proposed changes to the extradition law. We must, and we shall, continue to press them so to do. I commend this statement to the House

12.24 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister of State for advance sight of his statement, and for the customary tone of concern and deliberation that he brings to these issues. At the outset, I should like to ask him a couple of specific questions about the proposed extradition Bill, which I do not think were covered in his statement.

First, have the Government sought or received any safeguards from the Hong Kong authorities that, once that proposed Bill is on the statute book, the powers it contains cannot and will not be extended to include the extradition of political activists and dissidents? Secondly, what safeguards have been sought or received with respect to British citizens living in Hong Kong and British national (overseas) passport holders, should the proposed extradition Bill be passed?

However, as the Minister of State has rightly observed, our concerns go deeper than those specific issues—the implications of the extradition Bill and the violent protests we have seen on the streets of Hong Kong in recent days. Our concerns also must go to what has undoubtedly been the steady erosion over recent years of compliance with the joint UK-Sino declaration, signed in 1984—the agreement that was supposed to enshrine the one country, two systems approach, to ensure “a high degree of autonomy”

for Hong Kong and to protect its political, cultural and social rights and freedoms for at least 50 years after the 1997 handover. Just 22 years on, we see those freedoms and that autonomy being steadily taken away.

Last September the Hong Kong National party was banned, on so-called grounds of “national security”—the first time since 1997 that any Hong Kong party had been outlawed by the authorities. In April, nine individuals—students, professors and human rights activists—were found guilty of “incitement to public nuisance”, just for the supposed crime of organising the 2014 umbrella protests, facing sentences of up to seven years in prison. Now we have the proposed extradition Bill, which many fear is the thin end of the wedge when it comes to Hong Kong's judicial independence. No wonder opinion polling by the University of Hong Kong has found that public confidence in the one country, two systems commitment has fallen from 77% in 2008 to just 40% today. No wonder our Foreign Affairs Committee has said that China is moving closer to a “one country, one system” approach. It is, sadly, no wonder that we have, as a result, seen protests in Hong Kong in recent days, and the growth of the pro-independence movement in recent years.

So the big question today is, what are the UK Government prepared to do to demand that the Chinese authorities go back to the commitments that they made in the 1984 statement? As the Minister of State has said, the Chinese ambassador said last night that that is an historic document. But the Chinese have been saying that for two years. Two years ago they said it was an historical document that had no “practical significance” and was “not binding”. I agree with the Minister of State when he condemns those comments, but we have to ask, is it any wonder that the Chinese are so dismissive of the joint agreement, and prepared to commit flagrant breaches of it, if we as a country are not prepared to protest when they do so? Let me make it clear: I mean that not as a personal criticism of the Minister of State, but as a general indictment of the Government's approach over recent years, which has not been as clear and robust as just set out by the Minister of State.

I am not the only one making that indictment. Last year it was Chris Patten, the former Member for Bath, the last British Governor of Hong Kong, who described the Government's stance toward China as craven, in seeking a trade deal at the expense of advocacy for human rights in Hong Kong. He said that a series of “outrageous breaches”

of the 1984 declaration had prompted little more than “a slightly embarrassed clearing of the throat”

and some

“tut-tutting”

from the Government. This is a theme going back to 2015, the year after those umbrella protests, when George Osborne visited China and was praised by the state-run media for being

“the first Western official in recent years who has stressed more the region's business potential instead of finding fault over the human-rights issue”.

Last year, after her own visit, the Prime Minister was praised by the Chinese state media for “sidestepping” human rights in favour of “pragmatic collaboration”. They concluded:

“For the Prime Minister, the losses outweigh the gains if she appeases the British media at the cost of the visit's friendly atmosphere.”

But those losses do not outweigh the gains if they amount to the erosion of democracy and autonomy in Hong Kong, if they amount to the abandonment of the 1984 joint agreement, and if they amount to the endangerment of the rights and freedoms of Hong Kongers, including British nationals and passport holders.

Let me end by asking the Minister what action he and the Government will be taking, not just to express concern about these recent events, but to end their “craven” approach to China and to demand that the Beijing Government return to honouring the terms of the 1984 agreement.

Mark Field: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her contribution, and I strongly agree with what she said towards the end of it. We clearly must stand up at this stage, as indeed we have. I think it is a misapprehension to suppose that we have been “craven” in relation to the very delicate issues in relation to China, which are broad-ranging and involve not just trade but other aspects of a relationship with a leading nation in global affairs.

We believe it is vital that the extradition arrangements in Hong Kong are in line with the high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms set down in the joint declaration. We believe that that is vital not just to Hong Kong's best interests, but to China's. It is very evident that, even if there is a self-interest on the part of the People's Republic of China, from its perspective a recognised global offshore financial centre providing not just financial but legal services—the idea of a common law legal system, and the idea of having the confidence of international capital markets—will be vital to its own economic growth, and not least to the future of its ambitious belt and road initiative.

We are, however, very concerned about the potential effects of these proposals, and we would like to see a pause. As the right hon. Lady will know, this issue came to the fore not—according to our understanding—at Beijing's behest, but as a result of a particularly difficult case: that of a Hong Kong national who had allegedly committed a murder in Taiwan and then returned to Hong Kong for his extradition to be made to Taiwan. The Taiwanese authorities have not demanded that. None the less, that has made for a difficult situation as far as extradition is concerned.

As I said on Monday in response to the urgent question from the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), we fully understand that there are wide ramifications, such as the prospect of relatively minor offences being subject to extradition involving UK or, indeed, other non-Hong Kong nationals and their being sent back to China on what might be trumped-up political charges, particularly given the anti-corruption drive introduced by President Xi's Administration.

I hope that you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, and allow me to say a bit more. The right hon. Lady raised some general issues about the UK-China relationship, and I think that it would be appropriate to erase them at this stage.

We all know that the growth of China presents great opportunities, but also challenges. It is in our interests for China to support a rules-based international system, but it is pushing back in some key areas in that regard. We believe that the system is under huge strains, for a variety of reasons. We are entering a period of greater strategic competition, and engaging with China is vital for the preservation and evolution of existing structures. However, we do and will continue to challenge it when we disagree with, for instance, its approach to freedom of navigation in the South China sea. We speak up very strongly on human rights violations, such as those in Xinjiang.

We are active in ensuring that Hong Kong's specific rights and freedoms, and high degree of autonomy, are respected in full. We take a very clear view of our own national security, along with other countries. Only last December, we named China as being responsible for a particularly damaging cyber-intrusion.

As we look to the coming decades, it is clear that our relationships with high-growth economies such as China will be increasingly important, not only to our growth but to the shape of the global system in the face of technological transformation. Striking a balance—there will, inevitably, always be a balance, but striking the right balance in our relationship—will be more important than ever.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I am a sinophile, but Beijing's current interactions with Hong Kong are deeply unhelpful, which is a particular issue because Hong Kong can be a bridge into and out of China. In 2017, on the eve of Carrie Lam's ascension to the role of Chief Executive, I visited Hong Kong with other Members of Parliament, and met not only civil society groups but members of the legislature. Even back then, there was a palpable sense that there was a wrong trajectory, and a wrong pace towards greater integration. What message can we send from the House to civil society in Hong Kong, and in particular to members of the legislature, to show that we are there for them and are watching what is happening?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend obviously takes a great interest in these matters, having been a Foreign Office Minister in the past himself. I think that the biggest message we can send is the very fact that so much attention has been paid to the issue. This is the third parliamentary debate on it. Our debates are clearly followed avidly in Hong Kong, and will continue to be so.

We want to see peaceful demonstrations. It is worth pointing out that the rule of law does apply to demonstrations. At the time of some of the Occupy movement demonstrations, when there was an over-reaction, or a perceived over-reaction, from the Hong Kong police, fines and indeed prison sentences were meted out. We want to ensure that the rule of law and the autonomy that allows freedom of expression in Hong Kong are maintained. That is underpinned in the joint declaration, and, indeed, in all the arrangements that underpin the essence of one country, two systems.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I am grateful for advance sight of the Minister's statement, and I welcome his strong words, but those strong words must be matched by strong actions.

Legal professionals have expressed concern about the rights of those sent across the border to be tried. The conviction rate in Chinese courts is as high as 99%, and arbitrary detentions, torture and denial of legal representation of one's own choosing are common.

I am sure the Minister will agree that the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and assembly have been shown to be at risk in Hong Kong, with at least 72 protesters hospitalised by police. I wonder whether he has seen some of the social media reportage of protesters who have been protecting journalists. One journalist working for CBS Asia had been given a helmet and protected from tear gas by protesters. The protesters were also turning up the next day to clean up rubbish and ensure that it was recycled. I think that demonstrates the spirit in which they are trying to express their views.

Does the Minister agree that police violence such as this is unacceptable? What representations has he made, and will he make, to his counterparts in Hong Kong about the need for a de-escalation?

Many Hong Kongers fear that authorities will use the proposed extradition law to target political enemies, and have expressed concern about arbitrary detentions and the use of torture. Following a recent report from the Foreign Affairs Committee which called for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to redouble its efforts to "hold China to account through UN mechanisms, public statements and private diplomacy for its human rights violations",

[Hannah Bardell]

what conversations have the Foreign Secretary, and the Minister himself, had with his Chinese counterpart about the need to protect human rights and freedom of expression?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her constructive comments. I think we know from what we have seen on our television screens and on the vast social media that this issue is of grave concern—as she said, 72 people have apparently been hospitalised. As I said in my response to the urgent question on Monday, our biggest single concern is that the Chinese legal system is so disaligned with the Hong Kong system, which has led to arbitrary detentions, delays and the like.

We clearly want to see no violence either from protestors or in disproportionate action from the police, and clearly we would hope, and very much expect given what has happened with the Occupy movements in years gone by, that those guilty of disproportionate action or indeed of violence would be properly brought to account.

Representations are made to the Chinese Government on a vast range of areas; they are meat and drink to all of us as FCO Ministers, as they are to Ministers in a number of other Departments. We will continue to have a six-monthly report on Hong Kong; we are criticised at every opportunity by the Chinese embassy for so doing, but we believe the one country, two systems model must be maintained. The management of it is obviously a matter for the Hong Kong Government; however, the Chinese Government are on record as supporting the extradition proposals.

We will continue to raise Hong Kong at all levels with China, and clearly, as the hon. Lady will appreciate given the importance of the issue, over the course of this week there have been plenty of opportunities, both with China and our Hong Kong counterparts, to make clear our grave concerns, which are shared by millions of our constituents.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): The Minister has made a very important statement today. He has absolutely confirmed that the Government are going to step up their support for the joint declaration treaty and look at what more we can do to enforce it, and of course that is welcome, but I am very concerned—as I am sure others across this Chamber and across the nation are—for the more than 300,000 British citizens who are in Hong Kong now. While we all want to see a peaceful resolution through strong diplomacy to resolve this issue, what assurance can the Minister give us that the FCO stands ready to support our citizens should the situation deteriorate?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we will do our level best and do whatever we can from our side to calm some of the passions, not least because of our 300,000 UK nationals there. We are not aware at present of any British nationals being caught up in the violence of the past 48 hours. The question of British nationals overseas was brought up by my hon. Friend's constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), and we do have some ongoing obligations in that regard.

We are concerned about the potential detrimental impact of these extradition proposals on the rights and freedoms of all people resident in and travelling through

Hong Kong. At present the FCO is not providing specific advice relating to the proposed extradition Bill as it affects British nationals overseas, particularly as this legislation is still under consideration. However, we do believe that it is of the utmost importance that any extradition arrangements respect the high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms of the Basic Law. The arrangements will of course apply to all citizens, but we particularly have British nationals overseas and UK nationals very much in our heart, and will ensure our consul general does all he can to deal with any of the concerns raised.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Yesterday a young Hong Kong woman came to my office and showed me pictures of what had happened to friends of hers who had been protesting in Hong Kong. She showed me videos of tear gas being used and the injuries they had sustained as a result of rubber bullets being used. These things happen because the authorities that employ these methods think they can get away with it. She understood, as I think we should all understand, that the joint declaration is now under attack not just from the People's Republic of China but from Carrie Lam's Administration in Hong Kong itself.

As the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) said, the question is what signals we send, and I have to say to the Minister that the signal that he sends today in saying that the UK Government do not see the extradition changes as a breach of the joint declaration is fundamentally wrong and has to change. The purpose of that joint declaration is to protect the human rights of the people of Hong Kong. The legislation proposed by Carrie Lam's Government is a fundamental attack on these human rights, and if we are to stand by the joint declaration we should be opposing these changes unambiguously and vigorously at every turn. I have to say to the Minister that it is not good enough to hide behind a question of legal construction when this is actually about our political determination.

Mark Field: I think that is a rather unfair characterisation of our position, if I may say so. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has a long-standing interest in Hong Kong—this has been our third exchange at the Dispatch Box over the course of this week—but I was merely making the point that the joint declaration was silent on the issue of extradition. We very much feel that the spirit of the joint declaration is fundamental, for the reasons I have set out about the high degree of autonomy, freedom of expression and the like, but I was just making the narrow point that extradition was not raised in the joint declaration of 35 years ago.

The right hon. Gentleman touched on the use of tear gas and rubber bullets, and I would therefore like to talk a bit about export licences; I know this has been brought up in the pages of *The Guardian* today. The last export licence from the UK for tear gas hand grenades and tear gas cartridges used for training purposes by the Hong Kong police was in July 2018. The last export licence for rubber bullets was in July 2015. We rejected an open licence for riot shields as recently as April 2019. The issue of export licences is close to all our hearts, and it comes up time and again in our work overseas. We are monitoring the situation very closely and will of course undertake to review all current export licences. We will have no qualms in revoking any licences found no

longer to be consistent with the consolidated criteria, including criterion 2, which I think the right hon. Gentleman will be aware of, dealing with respect for human rights.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The Minister rightly criticised the Chinese ambassador's remarks on "Newsnight" yesterday, but is this not part of a pattern, as has been said? Is it not clear that there is no independent judiciary in mainland China, so anybody who is either taken illegally—as has been the case in the past, as with the booksellers—or taken with the complicity of the Hong Kong Government authorities is actually potentially facing an unfair trial by the Communist regime, with terrible consequences? Is it not time that we were more robust in what we say about the nature of the Chinese regime, and that, instead of pulling our punches because we are so afraid that our economic situation post Brexit will make us weaker, we stood up for our values and the commitments we made when we signed and agreed the joint declaration and said that for 50 years there would be one country, two systems?

Mark Field: We absolutely stand up for one country, two systems, and will continue to do so. On the Floor of the House on Monday I expressed some deep concerns about the Chinese legal system, which have to be borne closely in mind when we are considering any changes that potentially lead to individuals being extradited from Hong Kong to the mainland, and we will continue to make those robust statements.

We are in a world where China is rising, however, and we have to maintain an engaged relationship, as I am well aware the hon. Gentleman understands. That points to the balance in diplomacy that I mentioned earlier. I would like to think we have worked together in forging constructive collaboration on a range of shared challenges including microbial health, climate change, the illegal wildlife trade, money laundering and even threats to international security over North Korea.

There is therefore a range of global challenges on which we have to build trust with China, but we also must accept that our values are fundamentally different, so I am afraid that there will always be a block. Rightly, we must have the confidence, along with partners, to stand up for the values that are close to our heart, but we also have to recognise from our own history that those values evolve over time. Working together and building a sense of trust with China, and indeed with rising nations in other parts of the world, is an important part of diplomacy and we shall continue to do so.

BILL PRESENTED

DIVORCE, DISSOLUTION AND SEPARATION BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary David Gauke, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Sajid Javid, Secretary Amber Rudd, Lucy Frazer, Victoria Atkins and Will Quince, presented a Bill to make in relation to marriage and civil partnership in England and Wales provision about divorce, dissolution and separation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 404) with explanatory notes (Bill 404-EN).

Backbench Business

Social Housing

12.50 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that there is a housing crisis with too few genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy; further recognises that the number of new social rented homes built in recent years has been too low; notes that the Government has set a target to build 300,000 homes a year, which is unlikely to be achieved without building more social homes; further notes that Shelter's recent report, *A Vision for Social Housing*, concluded that 3.1 million new social rented homes need to be built over the next 20 years; and calls on the Government to adopt a target of building 155,000 social rented homes, including at least 100,000 council homes, each year from 2022.

It is an honour to rise to discuss one of the most critical issues facing us, and I thank the Backbench Committee for affording me the opportunity to do this today. Sadly, looking round the Chamber, I see surprisingly few people here to share the debate. I thank those who are here, but I am surprised at how few there are, given the very real and pressing crisis that we face in this country. It is the foremost of all the crises that we face.

The housing market is fundamentally broken, and it is the social housing sector that has been the casualty. As a result, homelessness is up 50% and rough sleeping has risen 160% since 2010. Elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of people are living in homes that are not fit for human habitation, yet this is the fifth wealthiest country on the planet. Despite that apparent national wealth, we are impoverished by crushing personal debt, large mortgages, high private sector rents, student loans, significant unsecured debt as great as it was in 2007 and stagnant wages that have failed to keep up with the cost of living. It is no wonder that the UN rapporteur has observed us as a country in crisis where the social fabric is not just frayed at the edges but badly torn.

This week marks the second anniversary of the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire, and we are reminded of how recent and current policy on social housing has failed and continues to fail our society, so how is it that the market and the policies that govern that market are not delivering the much-needed housing? The social housing report commissioned by Shelter in January estimates that the UK needs to build 155,000 social homes a year for the next couple of decades. That is the scale of the crisis. If good housing is fundamental to the quality of our lives, why is it not the basis for everything in our society? Lord Porter put it succinctly when he said that, with a housing problem,

"you haven't just got a housing problem, you've got an education problem, you've got a health problem, anti-social behaviour problem, whatever."

It is clear that we need to reset the market and restore the principle that a decent home is a right owed to all, not a privilege for the few.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the market has failed in constituencies such as mine, where it is getting more and more expensive to either rent or buy, and that we therefore need to build council houses to provide security for people and their families, including accessible housing, given that more and more people with disabilities cannot find homes?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, and I will come on to it. I am particularly familiar with his constituency, and I know that many areas of our country have seen high house price inflation, which has priced out young people, a lot of whom would ordinarily want to stay in those communities. This needs to be urgently addressed through social housing.

Twelve months ago, I was fortunate enough to meet a former soldier at one of my Saturday surgeries. He was back in his home town of Warwick, having been discharged from the Army after 10 years' service. A veteran of several tours, soldier Y found himself searching desperately for a job and a home, and he was not in a good place. He was really struggling. He had he been diagnosed with, and was clearly suffering from, post-traumatic stress disorder. Soldier Y was sofa-surfing. Until relatively recently, it would have been possible for him to access one of the hostels provided by Warwickshire County Council, but the cuts since 2013 have resulted in a huge drop in capacity and places such as Beauchamp House in Warwick are no longer available. I have mentioned soldier Y, but I could have spoken about any of the dozens of people I have met since my election in 2017, all of them desperate for help to resolve their own housing situations.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I would like to thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). I agree with him wholeheartedly about the need for a major council house building programme. The issue I would like to raise is the need for much greater funding for local authorities to build council houses. In my area of Reading, there has been an ambitious programme to build council houses within the limited scope of the funding that is available, but more funding is clearly needed. We have an excess of brownfield land in Reading, a former light industrial town. We have enough brownfield land to build all the houses that are needed until 2036, and I understand from colleagues that many other boroughs, towns and cities around the country face a similar situation in which former industrial land is available but there is no funding to enable the local authorities to build. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should be a priority for this Government?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend makes another important point. This is absolutely about the cost of providing housing and land and about how authorities are facilitated to do that. This is the most pressing issue of our time, as I have said, and Government policy should be to help our local authorities. Indeed, at one of the meetings of the parliamentary campaign for council housing, which I co-chair with my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, Lord Porter made it clear that, in his view,

"all the bad things in our society stem from bad housing, and the best way to fix any of those problems is to make sure as a fundamental that everybody's got safe, secure, decent housing."

I could not agree with him more.

We only have to walk down streets such as the Parade in Leamington Spa—and, I am sure, any of the high streets across the country—to see some of the casualties of this crisis: rough sleepers curled up in our doorways or sitting at street corners crying out for help, asking for loose change, desperately trying to create personal order out of social disorder. Inevitably, there will be an ex-forces

person among them, but no matter—they are all one community now. Surely civvy street was not meant to be this uncivilised or, for an ex-soldier, this ungrateful.

To understand how we got here and where we need to go, it is worth briefly considering the past and how times have changed. Had soldier Y been lucky enough to have been returning from the first world war rather than from Afghanistan 100 years on, he would have been greeted by the then Prime Minister's promise of "homes fit for heroes". Lloyd George recognised the importance of social provision and knew that because house building would be difficult it was only through subsidies that local authorities would be able to afford to deliver them. His progressive social and local authority approach kick-started the sector and resulted not just in a growth of housing supply but in improved standards in all new homes. It was actually following world war two that the council house really arrived. Enlightened administrators strove to deliver them, and none more so than the Attlee Government, which, despite the ravages of war and the shortage of materials, managed to build more than 1 million new homes to replace many of those that had been destroyed.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): On that point, statistics show that the construction of social housing has fallen 90% since 2010? Under the right-to-buy scheme, houses are not replaced on a one-for-one basis, which has led to a drastic fall in provision. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look at how we can tackle these issues?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. We have seen an absolute crash in the supply of social homes, and I understand that only one is being built for every five we are losing. Those are the tragic numbers that underline this, and they explain why we are seeing so many social crises in our communities.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I should like to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this really important debate. Although there are not many colleagues on the Conservative Benches this afternoon, there is huge support for social housing on this side of the House. He made a point about numbers. Cornwall is not led by a Conservative council, so I am not making a party political point here. When I came to the House in 2010, Cornwall was delivering around 700 social homes each year, but in this past year, according to the Library, the number was 1,437. That is a doubling of the number of social homes available to people in Cornwall, which has a very challenging housing market because it is such a popular place for people to have second homes. Where communities and local authorities work together and innovate, it is possible to use the Government's policies to meet local housing need.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I hope that she will make a speech later. Her point is valid and I am sure there are huge pressures in her community and other parts of Cornwall. I have discussed this very issue with many of her colleagues on the Government Benches, and I know that the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and Members from Somerset reflect similar views. There is a lot of hardship in our rural communities related to access to and requirement for social housing. What is being done in her constituency is admirable, but it comes down to

the ability to borrow and what can be done. She may be referring to provision by housing associations, but I am particularly keen that we should see a rapid ramp up in council housing provision if we are ever to achieve the 300,000-plus figures that everyone mentions.

As I was saying, the achievements of the post-war period were extraordinary, and under the Attlee Government an astonishing 80% of houses built were council houses. Materials were in short supply, but they achieved it. The boom continued under the incoming Conservative Government. In response to Churchill's challenge, Macmillan who had been appointed Minister for Housing, delivered more than 750,000 council homes in just one year: things had never been so good.

The giddy heights of those years and new social housing developments ended abruptly at the end of the 1970s with the radical policy changes of the incoming Conservative Government, and one of their first moves was to cut public expenditure for housing. Giving council tenants the opportunity to buy the homes they were living in, at a generous discount, was one of the defining policies of the Thatcher era and more than 2 million council tenants took advantage of it.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that one of the first acts of the incoming Conservative Government was to shift housing subsidy away from bricks and mortar and into housing benefit? It was a conscious policy decision and the consequence was not a shortage of money, but the spending of £22 billion a year on personal subsidy instead. As lower-income people are increasingly trapped in the expensive private rented sector, that is set to explode still further. The collapse in social house building is an extremely false economy.

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend who is very learned on this topic, and I bow to her knowledge. She is right: what we have seen is a transfer of wealth from the public to the private sector. A big chunk of that budget has gone into private pockets, as opposed to into public assets. Changing that is the ambition behind my motion.

That period was a watershed: it developed our unhealthy obsession with housing and a dependence on the fortunes of the private sector to satisfy it. Rising house prices were all the talk in the pub and they became the nation's conversation, fuelled by the press and an insatiable media seeking feel-good stories and helped along by the Government of the day. House prices seemed an impossibly good driver of the economy. Those who had capital and a good wage could buy a place and, through the sell-off of council houses, those fortunate enough to have access to money could bag a bargain. What was not to like?

Perhaps most striking was the impact on young people who rapidly realised the possibility of ownership was drifting away from them: data shows that at the age of 27, those born in the late 1980s had a home ownership rate of 25%, compared with 33% for those born five years earlier in the decade and 43% for those born 10 years earlier in the late 1970s. With hindsight—perhaps for some of us at the time—the excesses of the heady 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, when access to finance was unlimited and we saw the mass sell-off of council housing, were akin to financial ecstasy, but it would only be a matter of time before the market would go cold turkey. Of course

it did, with the credit crunch and the global financial crash of 2007-08. At the core of that financial disaster was over-leveraged debt and bad property debt. Lending had reached unsustainable levels.

We reach the present day, and housing has become simply too expensive—ridiculously so against relatively flat incomes. The average house price in my constituency is £285,000, 20% more than the average in England and Wales. Supply has been constrained for decades, but now the wrong housing is being built in the wrong places, and it is unsustainable. People are increasingly being driven out of the communities that they work in, such as in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, and that threatens the local economy. Though average salaries are greater than the average for England and Wales, they are only 10% higher, meaning an absolute differential of 10% against the average house price. Put another way, the ratio of house price to wage is 9.2; for England and Wales it is 8.0.

Despite all that, the council has built just eight social homes in the past four years. Soldier Y is not just an individual: he is the victim of a systemic problem in our housing provision—market is no longer the right word. That is why we need to re-set the sector. Yes, the Government have set an ambition of building 300,000 homes, but they are falling way short with just 223,300 built last year, even with the numbers being distorted by the permitted development of office blocks that are often wholly unsuitable to long-term or family accommodation. While 47,000 new affordable homes were delivered in 2017-18, 57% were homes for affordable rent, 23% for shared ownership and just 14% for social rent. For many people, affordable rents are no longer affordable, given that in reality they can be set at up to 80% of market rates.

Most concerning is that the Government have no target for social rented housing. As I said earlier, Shelter's commission on social housing estimates that 3.1 million homes need to be built in the next 20 years if we are to arrest this crisis. That is an average of 155,000 a year, which would cost only £10.7 billion per year. Just 6,500 homes were built last year, and at that rate only 130,000 would get built over the next 20 years, or just 4%.

We could afford to build those homes. According to Shelter's report and data provided by the New Economics Foundation, we currently spend £21 billion on housing benefit annually, money that more often than not is going to private landlords. Instead, what we have seen is a massive increase in the private rental sector, insecure tenancies, fees scandals, rogue landlords and too little agency involvement in enforcement among local authorities.

What needs to be done? I want to see a radical reconstruction of our communities. In Tuesday's debate, the Minister suggested that it is a complicated landscape, but I am afraid I have to disagree. We have made it complicated by yielding to market interests and failing to regulate in the interests of our people and our communities. In my view, we need to urgently reform planning, adopting a model similar to that in Germany; resurrect a regional spatial strategy, including for new towns and villages; reform compulsory purchase; scrap the nonsense that is viability, which is a scam exploited by corporate house builders; and ensure a 50% minimum of social housing on all greenfield developments and 80% on all brownfield sites in towns and cities.

[*Matt Western*]

We can address the funding though redirecting housing benefit to investment in the assets that come from building new homes. We should stop the sell-off of 50,000 social rented homes a year, and I urge an end to the right to buy. There are so many things we could do. I have talked about funding, and there is also the possibility of using pension funds, whether local authority pension funds or new ones, to support building homes. Birmingham and Greater Manchester are leading the way. On land, we could do so much with the public estate rather than selling it off to the highest bidder.

I am conscious of time and I know that many Opposition Members wish to speak. As I have said, we face a crisis and, to paraphrase Macmillan, the housing market has never been so broken. Homelessness is now 277,000 and 1.1 million are on housing waiting lists, while rough sleeping has risen 165% since 2010. The Government could, and should, deliver 3.1 million social homes over the next 20 years. It is an explicit target of 155,000 social rented homes a year and it is critical that we focus minds on delivering it. That is what my motion seeks to do. Without it, the housing crisis will only get worse.

1.9 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate. I share his disappointment about the attendance, which I will come to in a moment. If I may flatter him, he has not been a Member for too long, but he has, at an early stage, realised that we cannot influence and change everything. He has decided to focus on housing, which I would have thought was the No. 1 issue for all Members, because we do not want any more people sleeping on the pavement.

I hope this does not upset colleagues, but when she visited No. 10 Downing Street, Mother Teresa asked Baroness Thatcher, “What are people doing on the pavement?”. This is not a new phenomenon. I know it seems like it, but I have reached a stage where I have heard many of these things before.

I can understand the excitement, certainly in my party, at the result that has just been declared upstairs, but Parliament is not working well and I am increasingly worried. If the country and Parliament are split, we have to accept it and get on with the work. I want to see Parliament functioning. My colleagues may have decided that no one is interested any more in speeches made here, but it should not be like that. This House should be at the centre of everything.

I applaud the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington for focusing on the No. 1 issue of housing. I am not at the start of my career, but I hope that my hon. Friends who are fairly new and starting their careers will come to realise that this is an important place and that speeches made here should count. I hope our wonderful Whip has taken note of that, and perhaps we might organise things a little better. Although I am delighted to have the company of one or two of my hon. Friends, I am somewhat embarrassed. The hon. Gentleman takes this issue seriously and made his presentation to the Backbench Business Committee, and I can only apologise for there not being more support for his debate.

I suppose the reason I was first elected 30 years ago is of the sale of council and corporation houses, and I will come to that a little later. I am glad the hon. Gentleman mentioned Macmillan, because my party's election manifesto in 1951 said:

“Housing is the first of the social services. It is also one of the keys to increased productivity.”

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should see social housing as a national investment.

I have not come here to bash my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing. I have read the Green Paper and the Labour party's paper on these matters, and they both contain some really good points. I suppose it is naff to say that perhaps we could have some cross-party working, but if we do not have an election this year and limp on to next year something has to be done. We are all affected by housing, as we see at our surgeries and from our postbags.

The hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who is here, has done a fantastic job of ensuring that Grenfell is not forgotten. I do not want to correct the shadow Leader of the House because she is a jolly nice lady, but she said that none of our 10 leadership candidates had mentioned Grenfell, which is not actually the case. I interviewed them rather grandly, and I mentioned Grenfell to each and every one of them, because we have to make sure it never happens again. I know that the hon. Member for Kensington and other members of the all-party fire safety rescue group will not shut up until we have real change.

The Government do not seem to have a national target, and the 300,000 figure that is so often mentioned is for new homes in general. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) has joined us, because I represent an urban area of the Thames estuary where every single plot of land is built on. We cannot build on our parks, and we have no brownfield sites to build on, but his constituency has some space for building and he is rather keen that there should be more housing above shops on the high street. He also wants more housing between Southend and Rochford, the two areas he represents, in addition to the excellent proposals to transform the Queensway estate. Although it is not my area, I am very happy about that.

There is a bit of a row in Essex about where the new building will take place, which is why I had an Adjournment debate on it three weeks ago. I understand there is some resistance in parts of Essex, but there is no resistance in my hon. Friend's constituency.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): My hon. Friend is entirely right in outlining my priority for building above the high street and in the area between Southend and Rochford, so long as we get the right infrastructure—the so-called outer relief road that would link Shoebury to the wonderful Southend airport and beyond. So long as we get our fair share of infrastructure funding, there is space north of Southend and on the high street, if Ministers listen on planning to facilitate that and get everything joined together.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend makes a jolly good point, because all colleagues present agree that we have to make sure the infrastructure is there when we build—

the schools, the transport and all those other matters. In my area there has been too much enthusiasm for building flats, and we have a parking nightmare.

With a new leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister, hopefully Southend will become a city next year, and Leigh-on-Sea has been nominated the happiest place in the country to live, so we have all sorts of people wanting to live in our area, and we do not really have the infrastructure to support them.

I ask the Government for a little more clarity on targets. The number of houses built for social rent has fallen from 40,000 in 1997 to just 6,000 in 2017. Shelter has given all colleagues a good briefing—one of my daughters works for Shelter, which is a very good organisation—and is calling for 3.1 million new social homes over the next 20 years, which, by my calculation, as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington said, is 155,000 new properties every year. That is a little ambitious, but I would be very pleased if we got part of the way there.

If this Government and future Administrations are to get anywhere near that number, we must look at how we can re-energise and revitalise the construction industry to support that increase. There is much talk about Brexit, and some people say it is all terrible and that jobs are being lost in the construction industry because Poles and Bulgarians are coming over here, and all the rest of it. In that sense, we have ourselves to blame. We really need to make sure that we have the skilled workforce to build good-quality housing that does not lose heat—there are all sorts of issues to be considered.

As I have said, I was a beneficiary of the sale of council houses. When I was elected for Basildon, 40,000 properties were owned by the development corporation and the Commission for the New Towns. Of course, when Margaret decided that we should offer people the opportunity to buy, there were all sorts of restrictions on it; it depended on whether a person had lived in their property for 20 years or 30 years, and so on. I am not having a go at the Labour party, but the then Labour Members did not oppose the measure. *[Interruption.]* As the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) says, they did not oppose it because it was popular.

The issue about which the House should be concerned is how those capital receipts were not used, and how we did not go on with a new programme to build social houses. There are arguments about whether some councils were not running the stock well, and then things moved over to housing associations. All these things have been tried, but the point at the core of this is that we want more housing. As the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington said, we now know that the real problem was that the construction boom of the '50s, '60s and '70s was not sustained. If social house building had been maintained since the 1980s, I do not think we would be having this debate today.

Basildon was a tremendous success as a new town. I have an argument with my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) about which was the better new town, Basildon or Harlow. I know it was Basildon. It was designed brilliantly, and we put in the organisation. The use of compulsory purchase orders was done very well, without destroying the lives of those who, for instance, did not want to lose their little bungalows.

I support the Government in going part-way towards restoring the old scheme, which gave young people and families the opportunity to have a place to call home without facing the risk, as they do now, of a private landlord evicting them at very little notice. It was not a problem for central and local government to work together to deliver the housing stock when it was needed, but now local authorities do not have the power or confidence to build, and developers are taking an ever more rigorous approach to development. As I have said, in Southend West there is far too much building of flats.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I absolutely agree that we need to build more social and genuinely affordable homes. What he is highlighting as working so well in urban areas could also work in rural areas. We can create new, green, sustainable villages or small towns to meet the unmet housing need that he is so well articulating. I agree that this is about communities coming together with the local authority and central Government to plan beautiful places where people want to live, with green infrastructure, schools, health services and places of work—places in which we would all be proud to live.

Sir David Amess: However long the present Government last, I want them to deliver on my hon. Friend's vision for the future, because we cannot all live in London and the south-east. Scotland has huge, beautiful areas. Perhaps we could get some more houses built there, or in the midlands or the north, and so on. These are all factors. She represents a very beautiful part of the country, but people also need jobs, which is the other conundrum we have to look at.

I congratulate the Government on the 2017 White Paper, in which they acknowledged the need to build the right homes in the right places. As well as recognising demand, that statement applied to the use of brownfield land. As roughly 95% of local planning authorities have published their surveys of available brownfield land, it should be easy to identify the areas that are ripe for development. We have to get on and do this; surely it must be easy to identify them. I know that the Government are looking to have planning permission in place in principle for 90% of sites by the end of next year. I would be very disappointed if there were any unnecessary encroachment on our precious greenbelt land. There we are: I am introducing a bit of nimbyism.

If we are to increase the number of social houses in this country, we need to look at how to boost house building in general. Of course, there is no one policy that will invigorate the industry, but perhaps the most important factor is having a skilled British workforce, as I have said. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy must work hand in hand with the Department for Education to produce those skills. My party can be proud of the number of young people attending university, but that should not be seen as devaluing the high-skilled, often manual jobs required to ensure the immediate increase in the number of social houses. Just because someone is posh and well educated, it does not make them any better as a human being than someone who works in care homes or elsewhere. It is important that we have a high-skilled workforce. *[Interruption.]* I will rapidly move on with my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[*Sir David Amess*]

We need to encourage local councils to get building by removing the borrowing cap for new build properties, which has existed for too long. A Local Government Association survey found that 94% of housing stock-owning councils would use a removal of the borrowing cap to accelerate or increase their house building programmes. By 2041, the population in the south-east will have increased by over 30%, while in the north-east that figure will be below 5%. That is another factor to consider.

I should remind Opposition Members that in 2001, at the height of the Labour Government, only 60 new homes were built. That is absolutely dreadful. I could go on and on about that. I have heard all these promises before and seen not much being delivered. We must achieve a significant increase in social housing and re-examine permitted development rights. Successive Governments of all persuasions, dating back to the 1990s, have failed to support the construction of social housing. We really must change that.

In conclusion, everyone's home is their castle—of that there can be doubt—and there are an awful lot of castles in Scotland. Social housing benefits young people, families who have struggled to get on the property ladder, elderly couples in the private sector and homeless individuals. It is our duty in this House to support the construction industry and make sure that we build more social housing.

1.26 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and even more so to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). We might not agree on everything, but he always speaks with knowledge and passion about something that is close to him. We have a Southend theme in the Chamber, given that two of the four Government Back Benchers are from Southend.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who is a doughty champion of social housing, particularly council housing. It is a great honour to jointly chair the campaign with him and we have made some progress. We are pleased that the Minister is still in place, although he might have ambitions to move elsewhere. He does listen and he has acted. He has done some laudable things, in particular some of the changes to the viability assessment that are in train. I hope that he will listen to this debate and respond in due course—as he did to a number of us who spoke in Tuesday's debate, of which this debate is part 2—on a specific aspect of the housing shortage, namely, the shortage of social housing.

I have limited time and will keep my remarks short, because other Members want to speak. I am indebted to my council in Stroud, in particular to Doina Cornell, the leader, and to Chas Townley, who chairs the housing committee, but also to the wisely named Pippa Stroud, the head of housing strategy, who deals with this problem day in, day out. I will say some things that are quite technical, and I make no apologies for that. I expect the Minister not necessarily to be able to answer them in this debate, but to take them away, to read them and then to talk to me privately or to reply in correspondence.

The biggest problem we face is that we want to build more social housing. We have a good record, for a small council. We have built 230 social units over recent years and have another 50 to 70 potentially in the planning process, some with the land already allocated. I do not want to go over the same ground as others, but as other hon. Members have said, land values are a significant problem and our biggest barrier in rural areas—I will be unapologetic in concentrating on semi-rural areas such as Stroud. The problem now is that the council has tended to max out the sites that it has available, either by reusing existing council housing that was unsuitable and therefore knocked down and replaced, or by using garage sites, which are terribly controversial. No one wants to use them for garages until someone wants to knock them down, when everyone then says that they are their most important asset. Some things become problematic when one tries to grapple with these issues.

No one has mentioned it yet, but I should advertise the Monbiot report, which Labour commissioned. People will take it to be a terribly political report, but I hope the Minister will look into it, because it contains some things that a Conservative Government could consider. We are in an era in which we are looking into how to value land properly and how to tax it and to encourage better use of it. We all have in our constituencies land that is used inappropriately that could be used for social housing.

Besides the lack of land, the biggest challenge or barrier we have is how difficult it is to bring brownfield land into use. All the subsidies have gone now, and the CPO process is so labyrinthine that most councils will avoid it or use it only as a last resort. We could do with powers to look into how to take land that is not being used appropriately into public use, not necessarily for social housing but certainly for affordable housing. Stroud is a classic case: we lose out badly where others outbid the council, and without the CPO powers we are unable to do something about that.

As I said, I wish to make some technical points about why we find it quite difficult to deliver more social housing, which I will include in the framework of affordable housing. We all know the difference between the two, but if we do not have more affordable housing, we will not get more social housing, because that is a key component.

Pippa Stroud has told me of the issue of vacant building credit. When a redevelopment is taking place, a credit is given against the floor area of the vacant building, and that element is then applied against an affordable housing element. The problem is that the way the process operates means that the affordable housing is rarely built. A good site has just come forward, but no affordable housing has been realised. That is frustrating, to put it mildly, because it should have been. If the process does not deliver affordable housing, it does not deliver social housing.

The Minister knows only too well about the viability assessment, which links in with our problem. I was pleased when in the previous debate the Minister talked about the problem we have with the local housing allowance. The Government are reviewing that issue, and I will take that at face value. It is an important issue in Stroud because it is in the same local housing area as Gloucester. Because our rents are much higher, my constituents end up having to pay more top-up. Therefore, they are often driven out of Stroud into Gloucester, or even further field.

On major sites, the current problem is that there is some incoherence in the Government's national planning policy. This is an important issue in rural areas. Although we would call many of our sites larger sites, to my colleagues in rural areas they would be seen as relatively small sites. Nevertheless, they are important. The danger with such sites is that they can yield high value to the developer, particularly if they can say they will deliver so many affordable or, dare I say it, social units, but it does not quite work out as it should. Where we have designated rural areas and there are cash contributions towards rural housing, but not on that site, we need to make sure that this is bottomed out so that the money is used appropriately. I hope the Minister will look into how we designate a site. Even in Stroud, which is a semi-rural area, there are sites that are deemed not to be rural even though we would say they are very rural. I had an argument many years ago about post offices, because what I thought were some of our most rural post offices were designated as urban, for reasons that I never understood. There are arguments about how designation works.

Penultimately, there is an issue with the rural exception site cross-subsidy, which is a way to cross-fund affordable housing using market housing on the available rural sites. The difficulty, particularly for social housing, is that once landowners are given the notion that they could possibly provide more higher-end housing, it raises their expectations and it is much more difficult to bring them back to the reality of affordable housing, let alone social housing. Will the Minister look into the rural exception site cross-subsidy, because it is important? It is not right at the moment. There is no magic formula, although I wish I could give the Minister one. His Department will need to do some research to see how it can be altered, because there are some—I will not say abuses, but some opportunities that could be realised are not being realised.

I shall finish on the right to buy, which I hope we will suspend in semi-rural areas because we have lost so much of our good housing stock. I do not know whether the Government are rethinking this issue, with housing associations. It is galling that in a matter of time the 200-odd units that we have built could be bought and go into the marketplace. The most frustrating thing of all is when they are then fed back into the private rented sector, and there are sometimes two people next-door to one another and one is paying twice as much rent as the other. If they find out what their neighbour is paying to the council, those are some of the most difficult conversations I have, trying to justify that differential in the rent. We have to look into that, because it cannot be acceptable.

A lot could be done, but we are pleased that the cap has been removed, although it has not gone completely because there are obviously borrowing restrictions. We are keen to deliver social housing. We have a huge backlog of people waiting to be housed in Stroud. We can do our bit, but the Government have to help us. Otherwise, we will find that we are at the margins when we should be at the centre, dealing with our housing problem. As the hon. Member for Southend West said, it is a perennial problem, but it is acute at the moment.

1.36 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on his tireless work

and campaigning on this incredibly important issue. I am sure that, as it is for me, 50% to 60% of the casework of every Member is on issues of social housing and the lack of it.

We can look back at Labour's record and think that we could have and should have done more, but let us not take any criticism from those on the Government Benches. Under Labour, between 1997 and 2010, there were 2 million more homes, there were 1 million more homeowners and we saw the biggest investment in social housing in a generation. Fast forward to the present day and there are now 1.2 million people on housing waiting lists throughout the country. What was the Government's response? Just 6,464 social homes in 2017-18—the second lowest total on record. At this rate, it will take 172 years to give everyone on the current waiting list a social rented home. That is simply a diabolical rate when compared with the 150,000 social homes that were delivered each year in the mid-1960s, or the 203,000 council homes delivered by the Government in 1953. The evidence is clear: it has been done before and it can be done again.

My constituency is in the London Borough of Merton—a borough that had just 255 lettings in the past year, including just 146 one-beds, 65 two-beds, 43 three-beds and, amazingly, just one four-bed. With figures like these, what hope do any of the 10,000 families on Merton's waiting list have of ever finding a place to call home? I would be the first to criticise Merton for the level of importance it places on social housing—I do not believe the council concentrates on it enough or is innovative enough—but the Government cannot get away with just blaming Merton.

In 2010, George Osborne cut funding for social housing by more than 60%, leaving us reliant on private developers to provide social housing—the most expensive way to provide a social housing unit that could ever be dreamed up—or on housing associations developing on the basis of the new affordable rents. Surely we must all agree that it is a criminal act to the English language to use the word “affordable” in this context. I am not sure about other Members' constituencies, but 80% of market rent is not affordable to the vast proportion of people in my constituency. This left housing associations with the dilemma: did they continue to endeavour to fulfil their historic mission to provide housing for people in need, placing themselves under the financial risk of having to charge those rents and to borrow so extensively on their assets; or did they simply give up the ghost? That was a really difficult choice to make and I criticise no housing association in that regard.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made a very good point. Some housing associations behave well and some behave badly under those circumstances. This was not only about new build, but about the conversion of more than 110,000 existing social rented homes to affordable homes, taking them out. Was that not a deliberate policy by a succession of Conservative and coalition Governments not just to not replace social housing, but to diminish the quantity of social housing?

Siobhain McDonagh: I think that had many motives. One motive was to diminish social housing, but it had the consequence of putting housing associations at financial risk, leading to a terrible crisis and an

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

expensive crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) informed us of the amount we are currently spending on housing benefit. If we reduce grant rates, we increase the rent and simply place more demand on housing benefit.

Let me give as an example a London and Quadrant development on Western Road in Mitcham. I met my constituent, Tracey. She was desperate to move for many reasons. She had got to the top of the list. I said, "Tracey, bid for this lovely new place, which has been built by L&Q on Western Road." She said, "I would love to, Siobhain, but the problem is that my partner and I work and the rent is £1,000 a month. We simply could not pay it." The very people for whom these properties were intended cannot afford to rent them because they go to work.

It is people's real experiences that motivate me to be interested in this topic. It is about the hundreds of my hard-working constituents who are living in overcrowded conditions at private sector rents that leave them with little to live on and some without even enough to eat. Those families cannot afford to get on the housing ladder. There are not enough social homes to go round. For those who do make it into the private rented sector, they are always just one step away from finding themselves without a home. Not a week goes by when I do not meet yet another hard-working family who have been evicted from their privately rented property and threatened with homelessness just because the landlord can collect more rent from somebody else.

Ms A, with her two young sons, lives in a privately rented property. She pays £1,200 a month, less than the market rent. The landlord could get £2,000 a month. Her young son found his dad dead in bed. The importance of their staying in that home is paramount: so the kids can get to school; she can get to work; and they can get the support from our local church, Saint Joseph's. She cannot afford to lose that home. When she came to see me, she said, "Siobhain, it's in a terrible state of repair, and the landlord just told me to think myself lucky. Will you get environmental health involved?" Over the weekend, I thought about it. I know what the consequences will be if I get environmental health involved: six months later, that lady will lose her home. My alternative is to go back to my church to see whether I can find people in that church who will do some of those repairs for her.

Another lady, Miss P, has been a tenant of her privately rented home for the past 14 years. She has never owed money. She has three children and her husband has learning difficulties and a number of health problems. She has received her section 21 notice. It has expired and she faces two years in temporary accommodation at the moment. In two years' time, who knows how much longer she will be in temporary accommodation. She is desperate to find a property in the private rented sector, but nobody is going to rent to her and she finds it unimaginable that she is in this position.

At 7.30 last Friday, a lady and her 17-year-old son came to see me in a distressed state. They said they were a homeless family from Lewisham who had been housed in Morden for the past year. They had received a phone call that day from Lewisham to say that they must leave their property next Thursday and move miles away. So

the eldest son cannot continue his A levels, the middle son cannot continue his GCSEs, and the third son is going to have to move away from his school. This is a vulnerable family who are in temporary accommodation as a result of domestic violence.

Thankfully, Lewisham has changed its mind and it is leaving the family there, but how many families are uprooted, with children having to leave their school? As other hon. Members have suggested, a housing problem is an education problem, is a mental health problem, is a family breakdown problem, is a crime problem.

I am tired of the endless reports, the countless debates, the fruitless words and the lack of action. The Government have a house building target of 300,000 new homes per year, and they cannot simply keep willing the end of more homes without finding the means to provide them. So what will it be? Will we back here at the next debate offering the same ideas and hearing even worse statistics, or will this Government finally open their eyes and see the devastating reality of Britain's 21st century housing crisis?

1.46 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): First, let me congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate and on his excellent introduction. He is right that social housing is absolutely central to what we, as politicians, are here to do. It is damning to see the empty Benches opposite—it really does send out a very poor message to the rest of the country about where our priorities are at the moment.

As most Members have already said, week in, week out, housing problems are a No.1 issue in my constituency surgeries—whether it is to do with a lack of affordable housing, poor living conditions, homelessness, or landlords simply not rectifying problems in properties. We can talk about house numbers in the hundreds of thousands, but we should not forget that at the heart of this matter are real people facing real difficulties because we have had nine years of failure. Sadly, it is no exaggeration to say that this Government have failed across the board when it comes to housing. They have failed buyers and renters alike. They have allowed the leasehold scandal to emerge, and they have failed to tackle the root cause of the problems that the sector is facing.

I am pleased that today's debate is focusing on social housing. It is no coincidence that the steep decline that we have seen in social house building has coincided with an increase in homelessness and soaring private rents. Since this Government came to power, rents have become increasingly unaffordable, with private renters spending, on average, 41% of their household income on rent. In those circumstances, it is no wonder that more than half of private renters say that they struggle to meet their housing costs. Worse still, Shelter reports that a third of low-income renters are struggling to the extent that they have to borrow money just to keep a roof over their head. That means that putting money aside to save for a deposit so that they can eventually own their own home is completely unrealistic. A lack of social housing has put enormous pressure on the private sector, which means that a quarter of private renters, equating to more than 1 million households, rely on some element of housing benefit or universal credit to keep a roof over their head.

We have already discussed the Supreme Court judgment yesterday on the local housing allowance, which demonstrates the current injustices in the system. I know that in Neston, in my constituency, rental costs for a property are at least £150 a month more than the local housing allowance provides for. That is a totally indefensible and unsustainable situation, but what choice do people have? The decline in social housing stock has left more than 1.1 million people trapped waiting for social housing, with many of those families facing greater instability with rising rents in the private sector. At the same time, the number of homeless families living in temporary accommodation has increased to 74% since 2010. Let us just think about that. These are young people who may be forced to move out of area, potentially affecting their schools, their family connections and their jobs. Temporary accommodation really does strike at the heart of what we are trying to build with families in this country.

Welfare reforms have made private sector landlords increasingly reluctant to let to tenants who rely on housing benefit. As we know, many landlords simply refuse to accept any tenants who are in receipt of benefits. This is a discriminatory practice, and I pay tribute to Shelter for its campaign on that. Sadly, though, it is a fact that someone who is facing homelessness is not going to look to bring a court case for discrimination; they will simply look elsewhere—if there is anywhere else to look. The reality is that landlords' behaviour will carry on in this way, while local authorities, in an ineffective attempt to discharge their statutory duties, will continue to hand out lists of private sector landlords to those facing homelessness, but those landlords will never actually rent their properties to those people because they are in receipt of benefits.

Siobhain McDonagh: Both of my parents came to Britain from Ireland at the end of the 1940s, when there were postcards in the windows that said, "No Irish, no blacks, no dogs". Does my hon. Friend agree that if there were such postcards today, they would just say, "No benefits"?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Yes, we were familiar with the sign, "No DSS"—the one that used to apply. Letting agents, lenders and landlords all need to get the message that they are operating a potentially discriminatory policy. This really does go to the root of the difficulties we have when people are making homelessness applications. If they get a section 21 notice, that does not seem to have much effect on priority. It is almost as though there is a waiting game. Court costs, eviction notices, stress and uncertainty all have to come before any real priority is applied to people who are facing homelessness. The system is not working; it is under tremendous pressure and supply is nowhere near meeting demand.

Why do we still have the bedroom tax? Six years on, the same injustices carry on. I regularly see constituents who are still paying it and have been paying it for six years now. It is absolutely causing havoc with their finances. They are getting into debt and struggling to pay their day-to-day costs—and for what? To pay this unfair tax with money they do not have. If we have a new Prime Minister who genuinely wants to show that they are different from what has gone before, the first thing they should do is abolish the bedroom tax.

Of course, it is no coincidence that at the same time as we are facing this crisis in social housing, home ownership is also declining. Just a quarter of people born in the late 1980s own their own home by the age of 27, compared with 33% of those who were born five years earlier, and 43% of those born earlier than that, in the late 1970s. There is a clear trend here. There is a danger that an entire generation will be locked out of home ownership, because there is no sign of the situation improving. A major part of the reason for this collapse is that house prices have grown far faster than incomes, leaving young people struggling to meet the affordability tests set by lenders. Even if they are able to save the tens of thousands of pounds needed for a deposit in the first place, it is still a struggle, because the average home in England now costs eight times more to buy than the average pay packet. There are 900,000 fewer homeowners under the age of 45 than there were in 2010. The trend is going backwards, and that is why there is so much need for more social housing.

We must build new social homes and affordable homes, both to rent and to buy, for all those who need them—yes, for the most vulnerable, but also for those in work and on ordinary incomes, for young people, for families locked out of home ownership, and for older people reaching retirement who are facing old age in insecure, unaffordable, unsuitable properties. All those people are being failed by current housing policy. We are facing a situation where, for the first time, children can expect to earn less than their parents. After decades of the number of houses being built failing to keep up with demand, we are at a crunch point where home ownership looks out of reach to an entire generation.

I am pleased to say that my local authority is taking the lead on this. Cheshire West and Chester Council has now built in Ellesmere Port the first council housing we have seen in 40 years, as part of a mixed development. I was absolutely delighted to welcome the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), to this new development only last month. I am very proud that after 40 years, we are starting that development, but due to the huge increase in right-to-buy applications, we are not even standing still. Of course I support people's aspiration to own their own home, but the right-to-buy policy is incredibly short-sighted, because the reality is that far from there being one-for-one replacement, there is probably about one property being replaced for every four sold. I agree with the Local Government Association that this situation is completely unsustainable. The loss of social rented housing pushes more families into the private rented sector, further pushing up rents and exacerbating the housing crisis. In addition, as we have heard, some of these houses end up in the private rented sector, which again pushes up rents.

It is a gargantuan task to replenish this country's depleted housing stock. I am pleased that after many years of stagnation, we are seeing quite a lot of house building going on in my constituency, particularly on brownfield sites, but very few of these developments have any affordable housing. That is because the permissions were all granted some time ago, and the developers used rules brought in under the coalition Government to plead poverty and tell us that they could not build affordable houses because they could not maintain their 20% profit margins. As a result, all these new houses are

[Justin Madders]

being built, but on just about every private development in our constituencies hardly any affordable housing is being built. Most developers sought release from those obligations four or five years ago but have only started building in the past couple of years. It is therefore quite clear that the affordable housing was not the problem; it was about what they wanted to do to maximise their profits—it was greed. If we are going to build ourselves out of this housing crisis, we cannot continue to rely on the same avaricious developers who have got us into this mess in the first place. A cursory look at the leasehold scandal tells us everything we need to know about the priorities of some developers.

There is a massive job ahead of us, and things need to change. Enough is enough. My Front-Bench colleagues have set out a very ambitious plan about how we can achieve this. Yes, we need to build 1 million more genuinely affordable homes; yes, we need to target Help to Buy on first-time buyers on ordinary incomes; and, yes, we need to give councils the freedom to build and retain council homes for local people. But we need to get on with it now. This Parliament is broken. We look around and absolutely nothing is happening. The Government are incapable of making decisions. Every day they spend arguing among themselves is another day further away from tackling this urgent and very real crisis. This country deserves so much better.

1.56 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for bringing forward this debate, which has provoked really good comments across the House.

In my constituency, the council has, at last, initiated a programme of building homes for social rent. This depends on the Mayor of London's funding pot of £33 million, for which we are very grateful, to provide 330 new homes. That will go some way towards replacing the 120 homes lost in the Grenfell Tower fire and housing 135 homeless households, as of yesterday, still waiting for permanent accommodation—those from the tower itself, those from Grenfell Walk, and those from the neighbouring walkways who cannot bear to continue to live there.

However, this is not just about numbers. Our council, I am afraid, has a poor record in providing new social rented homes. It entered into a devil's deal with a developer partner whereby a number of homes for social rent, some intermediate and some for private rental, were built. Sadly, some were very poorly constructed. Construction standards in many were appalling. In one new development, the drains constantly backed up into the kitchen sinks. The homes had to be evacuated while the floors were drilled out and new drains fitted. In another, dodgy drains brought rats up into the building's first floor, where they could run unhindered as the supposed fire doors had such large gaps underneath them. This was a building that some Grenfell survivors had been moved into. The roof leaked. A ceiling collapsed. The lift broke, and a traumatised resident was stuck in it for hours. Radiators were found not actually to be attached to the central heating system. These problems continue.

In some of our new housing association mixed developments, the story is the same. In brand new buildings, roofs have leaked, ceilings have collapsed, loos and hand basins have fallen off the walls, and even a floor has collapsed. Membranes were not fitted into the external walls, so damp came straight through, causing black mould. Balconies were not fitted with drainage, so they flooded. Badly fitted cladding and window surrounds allowed rain to come in. Some basement flats flooded as door jambs were set too low. These properties, which are just three years old, are just a few examples of a common problem.

Throughout all this, the council is powerless to act. We have spoken to environmental health, building control and health and safety, and they do not have the powers of enforcement they need to make a difference. These issues are endemic across the country. We have a generation of, frankly, grotty new buildings. Many may not last 50 years, as did their predecessors that were demolished to make way for them.

The drop in construction standards is due to the total lack of strategic forward thinking. We have relied on skilled workers from abroad for so long that we forgot to train our own. Now that tens of thousands have returned—many to eastern Europe—due to Brexit anxiety, we have huge gaps in our skills, and no one is planning to invest in training for employment in the construction industry. The other issue, of course, is developer greed. They specify the cheapest possible materials to make a larger profit. I do not need to list the horrors that that can produce.

If we are to build 1 million homes, we need not only changes to the housing finance system and Government funding, but a generation of skilled workers, as the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said, and the building materials to create good-quality, well-built homes. Apprenticeships should be the answer, but many of them are poor quality. Some provide little training, apart from how to wield a glue gun; that is an actual case. The apprenticeship levy was a good idea but is poorly implemented. I believe that the pot has reached £1 billion, but contributing and receiving companies tell me that they do not have time to push through the complex bureaucracy, nor do many of them have the capacity to give good training, with all the best intentions. We must train our young people.

A specific Kensington-based problem is that of luxury developments left empty, which forces up the cost of everything, including social housing, and makes it even more difficult to build the homes we need for everybody. Many luxury homes, we suspect, are bought to launder illegally gained money. We hope that this matter will begin to be tackled next year, when the Registration of Overseas Entities Bill becomes law. I was pleased to sit on the Joint Committee that scrutinised the draft Bill. It will force beneficial owners to register their names and, we hope, will disincentivise the drug lords, people traffickers and other vermin who want to dump their dirty money in my constituency.

I will give an example of a luxury development with empty flats. On Kensington Road, almost opposite Kensington Palace, there was a 700-bed Victorian hotel, of Italianate design, in a perfectly good state. It was quite an interesting building. It was bought up by Candy and Candy, which flattened the site and was given permission by our fabulous council to build a

luxury development of 97 flats. I pass that building regularly, and only four of the lights are ever on. Imagining that the flats had all been bought and left empty, I spoke to the staff, who said that some of them had not even been sold after four years but were being kept off the market to keep the price up. I find that absolutely obscene.

As we begin commemorations tonight on the second anniversary of the atrocity of the Grenfell Tower fire in my neighbourhood, it cannot be clearer that we need to create a new generation of social rented homes, with stable tenancies, of good quality, where families can fulfil their dreams, increase productivity and reach their full potential in security and safety.

2.3 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I would like to thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this crucial debate. Housing is possibly the second most important issue facing this country at the moment after climate change, and it is one that affects the majority of the population—some of them very badly indeed.

In Ipswich, we had 175 people accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need last year. We also had 42 accepted as intentionally homeless. I despise the idea that anybody should be categorised as intentionally homeless. They may have made bad decisions in their lives that led to them becoming homeless, but the vast majority had no intention of being homeless, and they do not want to sleep on the streets or on friends' floors. They are not intentionally homeless, and I would like to see that category abolished altogether. We also had 12 people categorised as homeless but not in priority. That just goes to show the size of the problem involved, when people who are recognised as being homeless are not considered priority cases simply because there are so many cases that are of a higher priority.

The number of homeless acceptances in Ipswich is significantly higher than the national average and, indeed, the regional average. That is partly because people intentionally move into Ipswich because they are more likely to be housed. Any Member who represents a rural constituency and is honest with themselves will know that someone who is homeless in a rural constituency is more likely to be housed if they move into an urban constituency.

I am very proud of Ipswich Borough Council's efforts to deal with this problem. Seventeen new council houses are receiving their topping out tomorrow morning in my constituency. We have 60 new council homes under construction on another site, and we have 16 new council homes about to be started on a third site. We have a 45-person temporary housing unit nearing completion, which will be taking homeless families directly out of so-called bed and breakfasts from next month.

I have been round one of these so-called bed-and-breakfast hostels where homeless people have to be placed. I was told to leave—I was ordered out of the premises by a member of staff after I had been there for about an hour, because I had been smuggled in by one of my constituents. My constituent told me, "You won't be allowed to visit; we're not allowed to have any visitors." I said, "Well, I am the Member of Parliament," and they said, "That doesn't make any difference.

The owners of this place will keep anybody out—councillors, Members of Parliament or whoever." It is a place to live, but my goodness, it is not somewhere we would want anybody that we knew to live. We need to ensure that when people are homeless, there is somewhere for them to go straightaway, and so-called bed and breakfasts are not the answer.

Since we took back control of the council in 2011, 269 social rented homes have been built in Ipswich, and about half of them have been built by the council. I was proud to take my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) around the largest of those estates two years ago. I note that my predecessor took the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) around the same estate, despite the fact that it was built by a Labour council, and despite the vituperative opposition from Conservative councillors at the time and the opposition of that self-same predecessor to the development.

In that case, we were able to build the council estate, I am glad to say, and it was entirely for social rent, but my predecessor's opposition was not always ineffective. A development of 94 new council homes at the 1,300-home Ravenswood estate was blocked. It had gone through planning application and appeal, but my predecessor went to the Conservative Secretary of State and persuaded him to block the building of the 94 council homes, on the grounds that 20 of them should be shared ownership. Some £300,000 of council money was wasted on the abortive preparation work, and £1.5 million of Homes and Communities Agency funding was lost to my constituency as a result of my predecessor's direct intervention.

There have been not just historical blocks on the building of council housing; there was an attempt to block the 60-home estate that we have under construction on the grounds that it was all going to be social housing. The only way to ensure that we could continue with that development and be allowed to build the social rented housing was to set up an arm's length company to offer some of the exact same homes at higher, so-called affordable rents. The local Conservatives even tried to block the homeless families unit that we are finishing next month.

Yes, we need far more financial resources, we need a more skilled workforce and we need more freedoms for local authorities to build those council houses, but we also need the Government to dismantle the intentional hurdles that are still there. Yes, I am very pleased that the cap has been removed, but the Government need to drop their ideological opposition to council housing—not just here in Parliament, but among their councillors. It is not good enough just to have the right words; we also need to see deeds.

This is not about planning permissions. The private sector has hundreds of outstanding planning permissions for flats and houses in Ipswich, but it prefers to build detached, executive homes on greenfield sites in rural areas because it can make more profit that way. Only council housing will reduce homelessness and reduce rates in the private sector by reducing the massive additional demand over and above supply. It will increase the stock of housing for sale by reducing the incentive for buy to let. It will provide the houses that people need, and the people who need them the most will be the most likely to have them provided as local authority housing.

[Sandy Martin]

The private sector has not built the homes we need. The experiment to bring an end to local authority housing and to put everything into the private sector, started by Margaret Thatcher in 1979, has failed. It is time to accept that, and it is time to do what we know works.

2.11 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I add my thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), and for Stroud (Dr Drew)—the real midlands engine behind this debate? The fact that we have had speeches from Members from around the country shows that this is a national crisis. The problems are different, but housing supply goes to the heart of them.

In high-value land areas such as my constituency, the problem is particularly intense. House prices are more than 20 times earnings, and the average rent of all properties is more than £2,000 a month. The lowest quartile of house prices, which are the properties we would perhaps expect people on low incomes to be able to afford, reaches well over £500,000. Indeed, the only type of accommodation that is affordable to anybody on the London living wage, let alone the minimum wage, is social rented housing. That is why I am very pleased we are having a debate specifically on this issue. Yes, we need a greater supply of many different types of housing, including in the private rented sector, of good quality and at affordable rents, and we obviously need owner occupation, but the real crisis that has developed over the last 30 or 40 years is in the supply of affordable housing.

I do not want to talk too much about statistics, but there are two or three that I find particularly pregnant. One is the 165% increase in rough sleeping since 2010. There is no good reason for that to have happened, other than Government policy and neglect. Another is the number of social rented homes being built. I think the number was about 6,500 in the year for which figures are most recently available, compared with 40,000 in the last year of the previous Labour Government, but in the decades after the war, the figure was regularly 120,000 a year, year after year. Those disparities show exactly why it is no surprise that we have a crisis.

I would add another statistic. It is slightly more esoteric, but it is an indication of how Government policy has gone off the rails. The London Assembly member Tom Copley did a very good report recently on permitted development—in other words, the conversion, without the requirement for planning consents, of office blocks to residential accommodation, or the slums of the future, as they are now being called. I suppose a silver lining to that cloud is that none of those will actually be social housing slums, because not one of those properties is likely to be a social home. Of the 300 converted in Hammersmith since the policy changed five or six years ago, not one will be a social rented home.

That is one method by which the Government ensure that social housing is always the poor relation, and is never delivered. It is why, rather than talk about the statistics, I will talk in the few minutes I have about the politics. Unless we confront the political differences

between the two parties, we will not deliver on social housing. There are obviously big differences on other areas of public policy—the NHS, education and so forth—but there is deeply ingrained in the post-Thatcher era Conservative party an antipathy to and a manipulation of social housing, which has ensured that it has declined over those 40 years.

It is interesting that we now hear Conservative politicians—I do not know whether these are the beginnings of an apology—talking about the stigma of social housing. I have never felt that there was any stigma attached to social housing. That may be because it accounts for a third of my constituency, so it is prevalent. It may also be because it is absolutely in demand, because of its affordability. There has not been such a thing as a hard-to-let property in Hammersmith since the 1970s, and there are long waiting lists for any particular type of home. That is also because, as in the case of many London boroughs—I do not know about the situation outside London—a large proportion of our stock is what are called acquired properties. These are on-street properties that are now very valuable—Victorian and Edwardian houses that were bought up when they were cheap in the 1970s and 1980s—and they are giving life to the mixed communities that we enjoy in London, and which have been imperilled, as I say, by Conservative Government policies.

We heard the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) refer to the policies of the Thatcher Government and the right-to-buy policy. However, if that had been just about home ownership—about enabling people to buy their home, which is a popular and perfectly justifiable policy—we would have had the replacement of those homes. The demand for social housing did not suddenly go away overnight in 1980s; it continued. However, that replacement has never happened, and it does not happen now. Even now, despite a lot of attention being drawn to the issue, only two social homes are replaced for every five that are sold off.

The policy was actually about politics and social engineering. It was about trying to outwit the Labour party through what was perceived to be a part of its own electorate, by saying to people, “We will give you a very valuable asset for way below the value of it”, and that is perhaps why in Basildon it became popular on all sides. The policy was about something else as well. It was about saying—going back to the point about stigma—“You can do better than that,” and, by implication, “If you don’t buy your own home, but stay in a council house or housing association property, there must be something wrong with you.” The policy was taken up and developed in a more and more aggressive way, particularly in London, by Conservative politicians in the 1980s and 1990s.

I am thinking of the era of Shirley Porter—that was about straight political advantage as well, but it was not just about that—and about what Wandsworth Council did, as well as what was later done with my own council houses and those in Fulham. These cases are prime exponents of how to manipulate what should be the most important asset in people’s lives for political, social and, in some cases, moral purposes. People were told that council housing created a dependency culture, and that people should be paying market rents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said in an intervention, we saw that extraordinary and

damaging shift from subsidising land and building to subsidising private landlords, primarily through the extraordinary increase in housing benefit, with billions of pounds every year being wasted in that way.

There is a document that I often refer to, and will go on referring to until it is better known. It was written about 10 years ago by the then Conservative leader of Hammersmith and Fulham Council, and it had wide currency and gained a lot of favour with the coalition Government. In effect, it proposed the end of council housing based on four principles. The first was that we should have near-market rents, and not have below-market rents. The second was that we should have no subsidy to allow the building of social housing. The third was that there should be no security—no more lifetime tenancies, only fixed-term tenancies that were renewable. Finally, there should be no legal duty on local authorities to rehouse people, as there is under the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 for those who fall into vulnerable categories.

The explicit aim was to reduce over time the volume of social housing to about 5% to 10% of what it currently is. That may sound like fantasy, but three and a half of those four principles were quickly adopted by the coalition Government, and we have seen the effect of that in the 10 years since then. There are now affordable rents that are 80% of market rents, and short-term tenancies that mean that families grow up in insecurity, not with a home, but with temporary accommodation for that period.

The cut in subsidies that my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) referred to cut away at a stroke the ability of councils to build new homes, and led to the massive decline that has been mentioned. We did not quite get no duty towards homeless people, but we got a duty that could be discharged in the private rented sector. The effect of benefit cuts and other measures introduced by the coalition Government was that people were placed in temporary accommodation or in the private rented sector and were often—because of the cost of renting in high-value areas—sent a long way from home. Those policies may have been dreamed up in policy forums in west London, but they got the ear of the then Minister of State for Housing and Planning, now Chairman of the Conservative party, and quickly became policy, and that has led to the parlous situation that we are in.

Let me be a little more specific and concrete by describing what happened in my area when there was a change of political control. We had eight years of the Conservatives running Hammersmith. Social housing was not only a low priority, but was sold off as it became vacant. More than 300 council homes, which tended to be the larger, more expensive three and four-bedroom street properties, were sold off, so that they were no longer available to rehouse people. In most cases, there was no requirement on developers to provide any social housing. There was a policy not to build any more, and to reduce the quantity of social housing in an area that had more than 10,000 people on the housing waiting list—a problem that was resolved by abolishing the housing waiting list.

Let me contrast that with the current situation in Hammersmith under a Labour council whose first and clearest priority is to resolve those problems, and whose

second priority is to provide decent-quality, affordable social housing for a new generation. In partnership, it is building 440 new affordable homes, with the possibility of another 300 on top of that. Through development deals, and as a result of the council pushing developers hard to ensure that a large proportion of new housing is affordable, there could be another nearly 2,400 homes. Over the current four-year planning period, we expect more than 3,000 new affordable homes to be built in a borough that has some of the highest land prices in the country. At least a quarter of those will be new social homes—the first to be constructed for many years in the borough.

That development will make a profound difference to the lives of my constituents. The difference between living in insanitary, overcrowded and insecure housing, and having a proper, secure, assured tenancy of a property that is well constructed and maintained, cannot be overestimated. That should be a priority for this Government, but it simply has not been a priority for Conservative—and indeed Liberal Democrat—Governments over the past few years.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman's point about safe, decent housing goes to the heart of the concerns of my constituents in Deans South. Decades ago, they were sold substandard housing by West Lothian Council, and many of them have had to live there for many years. They include a constituent who has bronchial issues, as does her son. We are close to a resolution, but it will take the will of the council, the developer, social housing, and local politicians. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when there is an opportunity to right the wrongs of the past, we should work across the political divide and do everything we can to do that?

Andy Slaughter: I agree, and it is good to hear that message coming from different parties, regions and countries. I hope that we will also hear it from Conservative Members. Hon. Members might have gathered that I am not entirely persuaded of the bona fides of the Conservative and Unionist party on this matter, but if it genuinely wishes to change its spots there is now an opportunity to do that. That must, however, involve a large-scale building programme of social housing in this country. Frankly, I do not see that aim among the current incumbents responsible for the job, but I would be delighted to be proved wrong.

Even in the past few years, the Housing and Planning Act 2016 attempted to allow the sale of housing association homes; I am glad that attempt has been abandoned. The prospect of means-testing for council tenants created more insecurity and led to the treatment of social housing as second-class housing. That idea has also been abandoned. We have seen a change in recent years, in that the Government are less willing to take up extreme right-wing and radical policies, but we have not seen any alternative. I am sure that when the Minister responds to the debate, he will have statistics prepared by his civil servants, but such statistics never persuade anybody. We will believe there is a commitment to social housing when the Government start to build it, enabling and motivating local authorities and housing associations to build houses at an affordable rent. Without that, everything else is rhetoric.

2.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Members for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and for Stroud (Dr Drew) for securing this debate. We can perhaps take it for granted that other things are currently occupying hon. Members and we would otherwise have a better turnout of people wishing to contribute to the debate. We have to be fair to everyone, wherever they are.

For me, there are two facets to this issue: homes to buy and rent, and social housing provision. Although Northern Ireland has a different set up for the allocation of social housing, the difficulties are the same. I wish to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate, even if the Minister has no responsibility whatsoever for social housing in Northern Ireland—if only he did, we might be able to do some things.

Housing is a major issue in my constituency. Benefits might be pushing it at this moment in time, but housing continues to be the No. 1 priority. The Minister has been generous with his time, and in making himself available for meetings and discussions that we have asked for. I know he has a deep interest in his ministerial responsibility and takes it seriously. He is committed to addressing the problems and, like everyone else, we look to him for a satisfactory, positive and capable response.

When a young couple decide to marry and move in together that is a time for celebration, but such celebrations are short lived when we realise that the choices for first-time buyers and even renters are severely limited. As soon as a couple without children declare that they both work, there goes any chance of a social housing allocation—that has happened in many cases that I have been involved with—because there are simply not enough social housing projects in the works to meet the need. In my own borough council area of Ards and North Down, on 20 March 2018, there were 36,198 applicants on the social housing waiting list. Of those, 24,148 were in housing stress, which means that they needed housing quickly. In 2017-18, 11,877 households were accepted as statutorily homeless. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does not build houses in Northern Ireland, although it did in the past. Housing associations now build them and we have had a number of social housing build projects in my constituency, which have certainly helped, but the fact of the matter is that we need to encourage more.

People will often say, “Well, you can rent privately.” Again, these figures will probably not correspond with those in other Members’ constituencies, because the rental system is different, but the median weekly rent for social housing is £77 a week for Housing Executive houses. The median weekly private rent is £98 a week. For those not working, the Government no longer make up the difference. For those who are working and are not in receipt of housing benefit, an extra £100 a month is hard to come by when statistics show that the Northern Ireland average disposable income is a fifth less than the UK average.

The issues for those seeking housing in Northern Ireland are critical. The fact is that we are not building enough homes to affordably rent and, due to price hikes, not many developers can afford to lower prices to social housing prices either. I believe we need to do more.

I say that conscious of the fact that in Northern Ireland we need to do more, too. We need to build more to meet the need that is out there.

In Westminster Hall yesterday, I spoke on domestic violence and homelessness. Some people remain in abusive relationships because they fear that they have nowhere to go. If there was housing stock to go into, that fear would not hold people back from coming out of the cycle of abuse. The problem illustrated in yesterday’s debate is clear: if you are in a cycle of domestic abuse, getting other accommodation is extremely difficult.

The Crisis briefing provided for this debate highlighted the case in England. I believe the underlying issues are replicated in Northern Ireland. In 2017-18, fewer than 7,000 new homes were provided for social rent. Although that is a slight improvement on the post-war low of 5,900 social homes built, it is far lower than the recent peak of 40,000 in 2011 and the previous peak of 57,000 houses in 1992-93. In the three decades following the second world war, councils routinely built more than 100,000 homes a year for social rent. If we had those days back, I think the issue of those who need to rent would be addressed. We need to allocate more funding to build affordable homes to buy or rent. That would mean they could scrape together a deposit for a home. With the average income not allowing people to rent and save at the same time, we are seeing people stuck in a renting cycle, paying someone else’s mortgage and improving their home.

I recently worked on a private rent case, which is an example of the story I am trying to tell. The landlord put the house up for sale after his rental tenant of seven years had put in a new kitchen at her own cost. That is disgraceful, but it does happen. This single mother saved for years to fit the kitchen, yet she will never get the benefit of it. It is shocking that that should happen. It is little wonder that *The Irish News* reports:

“Over a third of 20-34-year-olds in Northern Ireland have yet to permanently move out, compared with around a quarter in GB...Over 36 per cent of people acquiring their home through Co-Ownership have children. According to the recent report from the Intergenerational Commission, millennials are half as likely to own their own home by the age of 30 as the baby boomer generation were at the same age.”

My second son Ian and his wife—they were married just over a year ago—bought a co-ownership home in Newtonards. Co-ownership homes provide a great opportunity for those who want to own a home but cannot pay the whole mortgage. It is 50% buy and 50% rental, but it does get them on the housing register. It gives them that opportunity, so I commend co-ownership.

To return to the quote from *The Irish News* relating to 20 to 34-year-olds in Northern Ireland, this is not from a lack of work or saving ethic, or a flamboyant lifestyle; this is to do with the fact that in early 2018 average pay was still £15 a week lower in real terms compared with 2008. It is harder for people and we are not making it easier for them by allowing them to do what so many in my generation did and get a wee council house that they then buy at a reduced price when they are able to afford it.

I am very fond of my colleagues on the Labour Benches and they know it. We get on well on many, many issues, but I support the right to buy. I always have supported it in my constituency, because I can see the benefits of it. I understand that things are different for some other

constituencies, but I support the right to buy scheme. In Northern Ireland, we have restrictions—not all properties are available to buy. For instance, you cannot buy bungalows, because there is a dearth of bungalows. You can buy flats and houses, but you cannot buy bungalows.

We have a generation who are now expected to do it all. They pay for broadband at £40 a month, which is not a luxury but a necessity when banks and shops are closing their high street presence in favour of the low-cost web. They either pay astronomical car insurance and petrol or pay up to £60 a week for the train and bus to work. They might allow themselves a social trip to the cinema, which in my day—I am not sure if you are in the same age bracket as me, Madam Deputy Speaker; I think you are probably not—cost £3 for two tickets. That is a long time ago: the tickets now cost over £15! How do we expect them to have a quality of life which is taken for granted by so many of us in here and still have the ability to have a home?

We must make housing stock a priority across the UK. I think the Minister is committed to that; that is my feeling from my discussions with him. I say that honestly. I believe he has the opportunity to prove himself. That is what he has said he will do. It must be affordable to rent or buy, and to do that we need a more effective strategy than the one we currently have. That is why I have no difficulty in supporting the motion tabled by my colleagues on the Opposition Benches.

From the beginning, when I first became an elected representative many, many years ago, originally on Ards and North Down Borough Council and then in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the biggest issue has always been housing. It continues to be a big issue. Generations of hard-working people are crying out for the right to be safe and secure in a home. We need to do more to provide that for the so-called lower and middle-class people who are the backbone of this country.

2.37 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for helping to secure it and I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on leading it. He made an excellent opening speech, which covered all the key issues in the motion. I agree with his comments, and those of other Members, that it would have been nice if there had been more Members in the Chamber, but it has probably led to better contributions because people have not had a time limit imposed on them. In one way, it has allowed the matter to be explored in greater detail.

I liked the way the hon. Gentleman illustrated the post-war housing policies versus the modern Tory housing policies. I agree with the sentiment about the cry for investment, clear targets, brownfield development and ending right to buy. These are matters I intend to return to.

We have heard some excellent speeches from the Back Benches. The themes seem to be homelessness, quality of existing stock, affordability, the critical matter of the lack of existing stock, and waiting lists.

For too long, since the Housing Act 1980 which allowed the right to buy, social and council housing has been the poor relation of housing aspirations. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) mentioned

a stigma that is sometimes attached to social housing. Clearly, people owning homes is not a bad thing, but the rules for the original right to buy have led to the current crisis in social housing, with homes being sold at a discount, the receipts bypassing councils and going to Westminster, and councils not being allowed to fund or build new council housing stock. It did not take a genius to see that it would lead to a housing crisis.

Since the original sell-offs, 40% of flats sold in England under right to buy have entered the buy-to-let market, pushing up private rents, increasing the housing benefit bill and costing the taxpayer. To balance that extra cost to the taxpayer, local housing allowances have been frozen, as we have heard today, which has put pressure on social housing stock and resulted in homelessness as people cannot afford to live in the private rented sector.

In addition to the failed right to buy legacy, we had further disastrous policy decisions by the Lib Dem-Tory coalition Government and the 2015 Tory Government. The bedroom tax—not only unjust but proven to be illegal in some of its applications—has led to increased personal debt and rent arrears, the cost of which has been borne in the social sector by other rent payers and local tax payers. It just shifts a central Government cut on to local tax payers. Furthermore, the local housing allowance cap was to apply to refuge accommodation, which would have caused that vital support sector to collapse, had it not been for the belated but welcome U-turn.

Universal credit has caused issues wherever it has been rolled out—the five-week delay, massive rent arrears—and this has had an impact on social and council housing stock in terms of the ability to maintain properties and build new ones. Meanwhile, in England and Wales, the 1% year-on-year rent discount in the social rented sector, which the Tory Government have forced through, is applying downwards pressure on the revenue available to look after the stock. And now we have the ongoing voluntary right to buy pilot for social homes. If this is fully rolled out, the sales projected will result in a £10 billion discount in the sell-off of stock, which means £10 billion effectively going to subsidise people to buy houses and being taken out of the investment revenue available.

Another negative policy has been the disastrous reinvigorated right to buy scheme introduced in 2012. Since then, approximately 76,000 houses have been sold, but there have been only 20,000 new starts or acquisitions. Not only are the UK Government miles from meeting their one-for-one replacement target over three years, but the gap is widening every year to the tune of about 7,000 houses. Worse, the replacement figures are based on new starts or acquisitions; we do not monitor completions or when houses become available for people to move into. It is almost a wheeze. I am pretty sure that someone could get a JCB, dig a hole in the ground for a 20-house development and show they had started 20 new houses. On paper, they would have met the new start criteria, but the important thing is: when will these houses be available for people to move into?

Under the one-for-one replacement target, the new houses need not be of the same type or built in the same location. This is clearly another failing policy putting further pressure on the social housing sector. It does not matter what the Minister says; it demonstrates that

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housing policies are still flawed. It also shows that replacement is not just a numbers game; there is much more to it. The motion mentions the number of houses that need to be constructed, but we need houses of the right type, in the right location and with access to local services and public transport, and to do that a mass of planning is required. Indeed, several hon. Members have mentioned the importance of planning.

Prior to entering the House, I served as a local councillor and was lucky enough to have housing as part of my cabinet portfolio. I was glad to instigate plans to convert low-demand flats into family houses for which there was a much greater need and much greater demand. In conjunction with the SNP Government, East Ayrshire Council implemented a council housing build programme to build new houses, including houses that were suitable for the elderly or adapted for wheelchair use. People are often trapped in houses not suitable for them, so building new suitable housing can change people's lives and free up larger properties for families who need them. If thought out properly, that is a clever way of refreshing the housing stock, and there is a spin-off as well: it reduces delayed discharges from hospitals, which is another important aspect.

Moreover, in East Ayrshire, as elsewhere in Scotland, part of the new council and social housing build policy is aimed at brownfield developments. The council is building new houses, creating new assets, freeing up properties for families and building proper houses while actually regenerating areas, which brings further drive and growth in the area.

All that shows that the picture can be different from the issues we have heard about today. There are ways forward and this can be solved, as the examples from East Ayrshire show. There it has been done in conjunction with the Scottish Government. Not only are they building new houses—this relates to some of the asks of hon. Members today—but they have ended the right to buy policy and so retained an additional 15,000 houses in stock. They also started a council house build programme in April 2009. It was the first council house build programme in a generation. Between 2007 and 2018, the supply of affordable homes in Scotland was 35% higher than in England and, in the last four years, that rate has been 50% higher.

In the same four-year period, the Scottish Government have delivered five times more social housing per head than England. We have built more council houses in Scotland than have been built in the entirety of England over the period of the SNP Government. That has been based on centrally funded money from the SNP, along with some local housing revenue money, not on the sell-off of existing council house stock. In Scotland, we are doing this despite Tory austerity and despite having to offset the bedroom tax, the council tax relief and LHA reductions, which obviously has put further pressure on the Scottish Government's budget and local budgets. In Scotland, we also have stronger legislation to protect homeless people and give them the right to housing.

We have heard some excellent contributions from across the Chamber today. I hope that some of the examples I have given show that going forward with drive and ambition we can build more houses, make them fit for purpose and regenerate areas. In that area, the Scottish Government have been leading the way.

2.47 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate on the housing crisis. I also congratulate him and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) on the council housing campaign they have led together. We have had some glorious contributions from the usual suspects today—we need a better term for the usual suspects, don't we? We need to brand them better, but the expertise and knowledge in the House has been well worth hearing.

As has been said across the House, the focus is not in this Chamber. The focus of the media is outside, where the latest Conservative party vanity project is playing out and sucking the life out of this place. We are all on hold. We have no meaningful legislation to debate, no progress on Brexit and no substantial action on all the big issues facing people across the country. Even the Minister reportedly admitted that the Government were not focused on housing—after Brexit, he said, the Government would turn to housing. How long will that take? And in the meantime, what do we have? A lot of consultations and a lack of action.

It is two years tomorrow since 72 people—the vast majority were social housing tenants—died in the Grenfell Tower fire. We know that the fire was avoidable, but *Inside Housing* has today exposed, to my horror, the multiple times that members of the all-party group on fire safety and rescue, some of whom are present, pressed, pressed and pressed again for Ministers to strengthen fire safety regulations in the wake of the multiple fatalities at the Lakanal House fire.

In 2014, the APPG wrote to previous Minister, Stephen Williams. Following more letters, the Minister said that he was

“not willing to disrupt the work of this department by asking that these matters be brought forward”.

In November 2015, the next Housing Minister, James Wharton, promised that he would make an announcement shortly. By September 2016, a year later, there was still no announcement, so the APPG wrote again to the next Housing Minister, Gavin Barwell. It wrote again to chase that letter in October and November 2016, following a parliamentary question in which the Minister had said that

“we have publicly committed ourselves to reviewing part B following the Lakanal House fire.”—[*Official Report*, 24 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 16.]

That Minister refused a meeting with the APPG and claimed that other letters had gone awry.

In November 2016 the APPG wrote again, raising a tower block fire earlier that year in which a pregnant woman had died. In February 2017, it wrote again, having not received a reply, pressing for a date for the promised review. In April 2017, the Minister replied, suggesting again that correspondence had been lost. The APPG wrote again, pointing out that it was 11 years since part B of the building regulations was last reviewed and that it had been promised action by three successive Ministers since 2010. In May 2017, the Government replied, brushing off concerns about the fire in which the pregnant woman had died. Finally, on 19 May 2017, the APPG sent another letter pressing for action. That letter was sent only a month before the Grenfell Tower fire.

In all, the APPG wrote to Ministers 21 times. It is hard to know what to say. The changes that the APPG was calling for have still not been implemented. The Secretary of State said last week that the legislation to implement wholesale reform of our system of fire safety and building control would not be brought forward until the next parliamentary Session. The culture of indifference stopped action before Grenfell, and two years on, we see the same pattern.

My direct plea to the Minister today is to speed up the action. I know that he has consulted on approved document B and launched a consultation on Hackitt, and that the Government have said that they will pay for the removal of flammable cladding, but two years on from the fire, the fundamentals of the system remain unchanged. Flammable cladding remains on blocks, approved document B remains unchanged and the accountabilities in the system have also not changed. That is simply not good enough.

Turning to the wider crisis in our affordable housing supply, we have heard so eloquently today about the scale of the housing crisis, which spans beyond the issue of social housing, although that is without doubt the vital building block in creating a housing market that works for everyone, not just the few. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington set out the context of the housing crisis and the history of council house building, with the big boost to building that we saw after the second world war. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) told us very powerful stories about what that means for people in today's situation, where we do not have the house building that we once saw.

Over the last nine years, not only have the Government failed to tackle the gap between social housing supply and demand, but their policies are turning the gap into a gulf. Research from the National Housing Federation and the homelessness charity Crisis shows that England needs to build 145,000 affordable homes a year for the next 12 years. As we have heard, Shelter has put the figure at 3.1 million social rent homes over 20 years, but the last two years have seen the lowest level of social rent homes built since world war two. Only 6,500 were built last year, which is a fall of over 80% since the last year of the last Labour Government. The number of new homes built for affordable home ownership has almost halved since the time of the last Labour Government to less than 13,000 homes last year.

It is not hard to see why house building numbers have plummeted under this Government. Real-terms Government funding for new affordable homes has been cut by around 90%—it was less than £500 million last year compared with over £4 billion in the last year of the last Labour Government. The funding is nowhere near enough to deliver the scale of homes that we need, particularly because while the Government have failed at building, they have proved successful at selling off our existing social housing stock.

As we have heard, the Government promised a one-for-one replacement of homes sold under right to buy, but in reality, we are seeing one home built for every four sold. Over the past five years, under the scheme, councils have lost enough homes to house the population of Oxford. Councils do not even get to keep the profits from the sales; two-thirds of the receipts are sent to central Government. Meanwhile, as hon. Members have

so eloquently said, the term “affordable” has been tested to the limit and beyond, including homes that are at 80% of market rents. Since 2012, over 111,000 genuinely affordable homes for social rent have been converted to those not so affordable “affordable” homes.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we simply do not have enough social housing. As a result, over 1 million households are on the council waiting list, and if house building carried on at the current rate, it would take 172 years to get those people the homes that they need. Last year, 18,000 fewer social lets were made to homeless households than a decade before. Rough sleeping has doubled. There are 120,000 children in temporary accommodation—my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) told us about the quality of that accommodation. There are more families pushed into more expensive, less secure, worse-quality private rented homes; a million more households paying private rents, which have skyrocketed by an average of getting on for £2,000 a year since 2010; and thousands still paying the bedroom tax, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) pointed out.

The impact of all this is not just felt by individuals, because Government finances are being hit, too. The housing benefit bill, going straight into landlords' pockets, has more than doubled since the early 2000s. Spending on temporary accommodation increased by 39% between 2011 and 2016—my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) pointed that out so well. It is an utterly false economy of spending—£22 billion a year on housing benefit rather than investment in the bricks and mortar that would keep an asset in the ownership of the state, to be enjoyed by everybody at a lower cost. Of the children living in poverty, 1.3 million live in private rented accommodation. We could lift a lot of those children out of poverty if they were in council housing. We have our priorities completely the wrong way round and it is a waste of Government funding.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden said, Labour's record, although not always perfect, was clear: 2 million more homes, a million more home owners, and the biggest investment in social housing in a generation.

The next Labour Government's plans for social housing are more ambitious. We want to build a million genuinely affordable homes over 10 years, including the biggest council house building programme of nearly 40 years. Crucially, we will stop the haemorrhaging of our stock by suspending the right to buy. Labour long called for the lifting of the cap, and we are glad that the Government have finally listened, but that alone will not work, especially for the 205 councils that no longer own any housing stock—they will be unable to use their new borrowing powers.

Labour will back councils to set up new housing revenue accounts. We will make long-term funding available so that councils have the certainty to properly invest in social housing. Along with the money, councils and housing associations will have new powers and flexibilities to build again at scale. We would end the Conservatives' so-called “affordable rent”, redefining “affordable” to be linked to local incomes. We will transform how land is available and how much it costs. We would scrap permitted development, which Members have talked eloquently

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of already, and we would invest in making sure that all council and housing association homes are warm, safe and dry. The money we save in housing benefits will be recycled into helping tackle the causes of the housing crisis, and our new homes would meet green standards.

Tomorrow's anniversary, marking two years since the Grenfell Tower fire, is a terrible reminder of the tragic consequences of not giving social housing tenants a voice. The tower block fire in Barking on Sunday, where more than a third of the properties were social housing, was a stark reminder that too little has changed. Highly flammable material on the side of a tall building, and residents' complaints ignored—these lessons were not learned after the Lakanal fire a decade ago, and they have not been learned following the Grenfell Tower fire. We must do better.

2.58 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I commend the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing this important debate. I agree with him that above all else, it should be the collective mission of the House to build the homes that the next generation needs.

I agree with other Members that the attendance across the House for the debate has been disappointing. I am sure none of us will take any pleasure from the fact that there was not a single Liberal Democrat in the Chamber to talk about this very important issue. It is indeed important, because since taking up this role last year, boosting the supply of housing of all types has been my night-and-day obsession as Housing Minister, so a largely useful and constructive debate such as today's certainly helps.

For the most part, I am grateful that Members have come forward with constructive suggestions, and indeed questions, which we will try to answer—in written form if I cannot answer them today. I want to pick out one or two.

I agree with the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington's basic assertion that bad housing leads to lots of other bad things and that good housing sits at the base of a fruitful and happy life. A secure home is something to which we should aspire for all the people whom we serve, and it is certainly a central part of our mission. I was very affected by his specific point about a veteran whom he called soldier Y. I hope that he is engaging with the Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire armed forces covenant partnership, which I understand does a fair amount of work in his region in connection with the covenant and the housing rights that come with it.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving such a balanced view of the last three or four decades of house building and the part that Governments of all types have played in producing an under-supply. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who has sadly had to go and do his duty in Westminster Hall, and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) referred to the complexity of the issue and suggested that there should be a cross-party effort to reach some kind of general solution.

Let me now issue a gentle reminder to Members. I understand that, in these circumstances, it is the role of the Front Bencher to point to a utopian future in which

everything will be easy and simple and it will just be a matter of writing cheques and handing out shovels and houses will appear. However, this is a problem and a crisis that has been decades in the making, and I think we all have a duty to share some sense of responsibility.

Back in the days when I was a Westminster councillor, we were induced out of council house building and owning by the then Labour Government, who would only give us our decent homes money if we got rid of our council housing stock. A number of Members, not least the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), tried to dredge up ancient history and point to some kind of ideological opposition to social housing among Government Members. In fact, more council houses were built in the last year of Margaret Thatcher's 10 years as Prime Minister than were built in the 13 years of the new Labour Government.

The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), has often nodded in agreement about the lack of council house building during the years when he was part of the Government. I think that only about 2,500 council houses were built during those 13 years. Much has been said about the right to buy, but during all those years not a single finger was lifted against it. The policy persisted throughout the entire period, and is still popular with those who can benefit from it.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly raised the issue of supply. The Government are committed to increasing the supply of all tenures of affordable housing, helping to meet the housing needs of a wide range of people including those who are on a pathway to home ownership. I am pleased to say that we are already delivering on our commitments: since 2010, we have delivered more than 407,000 new affordable homes, including more than 293,000 for rent. In fact, more affordable homes have been delivered in the past eight years than in the last eight years of Labour government. More than 481,000 households have been helped into home ownership through schemes such as Help to Buy and right to buy.

We are not complacent, however, and we are certainly not slowing down; far from it. Housing remains our top priority, and we are championing the delivery of more affordable homes. We want to see local authorities deliver a new generation of council homes across the country. That is why we scrapped the housing revenue account borrowing caps last October, freeing up councils to double their delivery and, we hope, to exceed that level. Removing the borrowing caps will also help to diversify the house building market, with councils more able to take on projects and sites that private developers would consider too small.

The abolition of the caps means that stock-owning councils such as Warwick now have the financial flexibility that enables them to borrow to increase council house building. Even councils that do not own housing can get on with building homes. They have the flexibility to borrow to build up to 200 without opening a housing revenue account, subject to obtaining a direction from the Secretary of State. I am keen for all councils to seize the opportunities available and quickly start ramping up delivery to meet local housing need. I am considering what assistance we can give councils that do not have HRAs, either by providing advice and expertise or by pairing them with councils that do have HRAs to help them to act quickly.

We support councils and housing associations with grant funding for the construction of new affordable homes. We have made over £9 billion available through the affordable homes programme, which will deliver 250,000 additional affordable homes by March 2022. We listen constantly to the affordable housing sector and work to create a stable investment environment to support the delivery of more affordable homes across the country. We have introduced strategic partnerships to offer housing associations greater flexibility, ensuring funding can be allocated where it is needed across multiple projects while still meeting overall delivery targets.

This funding certainty also makes it more viable for larger housing associations to take risks and invest in more ambitious projects, with greater delivery flexibilities and funding guaranteed over a longer period. And we have gone further, providing the sector with longer-term certainty of funding. In September last year, the Prime Minister announced a £2 billion long-term funding pilot starting in 2022, which will boost affordable housing by giving housing associations long-term certainty and moving away from the stop-start delivery that characterised previous approaches to funding. For the first time in their history, housing associations can now bid for funding up to a decade long.

This unprecedented approach will deliver more affordable homes and stimulate the sector's wider building ambitions. Strategic partnerships and our 10-year funding commitment mark the first time any Government have offered housing associations such certainty. They will also allow them to explore the use of greater technology in house building. I visited a factory in Walsall in the west midlands recently where Accord Housing will be producing 1,000 homes for affordable and social rent out of the factory, and so good are the environmental standards of these new homes that there are lower arrears because people can afford to heat and light them more cheaply. There are huge opportunities coming out of this programme that I hope associations will take. We have also set a long-term rent deal, announcing that increases to social housing rents will be limited to the consumer price index plus 1% for five years from 2020. Through all these measures, we are creating an investment environment that supports both councils and housing associations to build more.

As set out in our housing White Paper, we are determined to support households who are locked out of the market, and therefore we are also funding affordable home ownership. I am pleased to say that through our affordable homes programme we have delivered 60,000 shared-ownership homes since 2010. We believe that shared ownership has an important role to play as part of a diverse and thriving housing market in helping those who aspire to home ownership but may be otherwise be unable to afford it.

This Government pledged to address overall housing supply in our 2017 housing White Paper and our ambition to deliver 300,000 homes per year on average by the mid-2020s was set out in the autumn Budget of 2017. The Government agree that affordable housing will play a vital role in reaching this target, which is why we have created stable investment for the sector; now it is time for housing associations and councils to step forward and build more.

We recognise the need for more social rent homes, which is why also in 2017 we announced an additional £2 billion of funding for the affordable homes programme

to deliver social rent homes in areas of high affordability pressure. This funding should deliver at least 12,500 social rent homes in high-cost areas, in a move to support families struggling to pay their rent. This represents a real change in how we focus the Government's grant funding, targeting our most affordable homes to the areas where they are most needed. I want to stress that a mix of different tenures is vital to meet the needs of a wide range of people and allow the sector to build the right homes in the right places.

Alongside affordable home ownership to help those struggling to purchase their first home, our expanded programme offers two rental products. Affordable rent enables us to maximise the number of homes built with any Government investment, while social rent will meet the needs of struggling families and those most at risk of homelessness in areas of the country where affordability is most pressured. We will continue to provide opportunities for more people to afford their own home and seek to build on the progress made in building new social homes as we approach this year's spending review.

This Government are committed to delivering more affordable housing, as I have outlined. We want to support the delivery of the right homes, whether for rent or ownership, in the right places. We have listened to the sector and introduced a number of measures to create a more stable environment. We have increased the size of the affordable homes programme, reintroduced social rent, removed the housing revenue account borrowing caps for local authorities, announced £2 billion of long-term funding for housing associations through strategic partnerships right through a decade, and we are setting out a long-term rent deal for councils and housing associations in England from 2020.

The hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) raised the issue of Grenfell—as did the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad)—and she will know that much of my time has been focused on building safety. While we are committed to increasing supply across the country of all types of housing, not least for social rent, the hon. Member for Croydon Central is right to continue to challenge us on the work we still need to do to make sure those buildings are delivered and built in a safe environment. I am pleased that we managed to get our response to the Hackitt inquiry out last week. We have accepted all the recommendations and, indeed, gone further on them, but there is definitely more work to do. The House has my commitment that, however long I am in this job, and I am now coming up on 12 months—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you. The House has my commitment that this will be one of my primary focuses. Many of us will attend memorial events tomorrow to commemorate the second anniversary of that appalling tragedy, and while it is a point at which we will remember the 72 lives that were lost, it is also a reminder to us all in this House that the system that was built up over a number of decades that resulted in that awful tragedy has to change.

3.10 pm

Matt Western: May I start by thanking everyone across the House for their incredibly valuable contributions to what I would agree with the Minister was a constructive and illuminating debate. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for supporting and sponsoring this debate today.

[Matt Western]

As we have heard, it is generally understood that housing is particularly important, but that social housing is even more so. We have heard from across the country just how expensive housing can be in so many of our towns and cities. We have heard about multiples of 20 against average income, such is the expense of property—certainly in Cambridge, London and elsewhere.

We have also heard just how popular social housing and council housing can be and about the massive loss of stock we have suffered in recent decades. My hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) gave good examples of what can be done when local authorities have the foresight and the ambition to deliver good-quality social housing. We also heard illustrations from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who described the reality for her constituents and the hardship that they face.

Elsewhere, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the struggles that people still face incurring the bedroom tax and asked why that tax still had not been cancelled.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted very well the reality for young people in particular and explained what a struggle it is for millennials to get on the housing ladder.

I also thank the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who highlighted the very positive reality north of the border and described what it had been possible to achieve in delivering housing as a result of being liberated from some of the constraints we have here. He also talked about the challenges and the threats from universal credit and of Help to Buy.

I thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for her excellent summary of the debate. I will not attempt to repeat that, but she rightly highlighted the reality of what has happened, as we find ourselves still reflecting on Grenfell two years on. She talked about all the mistakes that were made with Lakanal and described how people were indifferent and not listening. That case and those arguments have also been well set out in the campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). I thank the Minister for his summary and for his warm words, and I look forward to working with him in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises that there is a housing crisis with too few genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy; further recognises that the number of new social rented homes built in recent years has been too low; notes that the Government has set a target to build 300,000 homes a year, which is unlikely to be achieved without building more social homes; further notes that Shelter's recent report, *A Vision for Social Housing*, concluded that 3.1 million new social rented homes need to be built over the next 20 years; and calls on the Government to adopt a target of building 155,000 social rented homes, including at least 100,000 council homes, each year from 2022.

Parliament as a Workplace

[*Relevant document: House of Commons Commission and the House of Lords Commission: Response to the UK Gender Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018, June 2019*]

3.14 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered making Parliament a more modern, family friendly and accessible workplace.

It is a pleasure to open this debate. I place on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and allowing it time in the main Chamber. As the House is currently debating the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, now seems a good opportunity for a concurrent debate about how we can improve the workings of Parliament better to support Members, staff and the public.

I know that the appetite for change varies from Member to Member and that no single person has all the answers. Change requires addressing many complex issues and I hope that debates such as this give Members an opportunity to put across their views. Parliament is an old building, and its methods and workings are unmistakably historic. Many of our practices are globally renowned and often make our parliamentary democracy the envy of the world. In other ways, we are stuck in the past, perhaps too afraid of reform.

That is not to say that some family-friendly and accessibility reforms have not been achieved. Over the past few years we have seen the creation of an onsite nursery and the recent introduction of proxy voting, and we currently have a more diverse representation in Parliament than ever before. Those have been made possible by a vast array of people and I want to place on record my thanks to Mr Speaker, the former Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, Government and Opposition Whips, the House of Commons Commission, the Procedure Committee, the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), to name but a few.

Those of us who are keen to continue the modernisation of Parliament know that we cannot stop here, especially given that it is 1,306 days since the last debate on the family friendliness of Parliament, initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). From my own perspective, before entering Parliament, I was an employment rights lawyer for many years, specialising in maternity rights and family-friendly working. When my local MP retired at the 2017 general election, I agonised over whether to put myself forward, particularly as my son was only two at the time. It was the existence of the House of Commons nursery that made the decision to stand for Parliament possible. Two years on from that, with a husband who is also a sitting MP, it was the recent introduction of proxy voting that has enabled us to have a second child.

The fact that there has been change does not mean that we should stop there. If Parliament is to be truly representative of those we seek to serve, we must continue to look at ways to break down barriers for those who might consider putting themselves forward for public office. Shortly after my election in 2017, my hon. Friend

the Member for Bury North (James Frith) convened 11 newly elected Members of Parliament to produce a pamphlet on ideas for reforming Westminster. Together we came up with a range of far-reaching proposals that showed that there are MPs who want to help to improve the workings of Parliament for the benefit of all.

In my experience, one area that we should consider for reform is how Members of Parliament vote. While I recognise and respect that some Members advocate remote electronic voting, given the importance of parliamentary votes I believe that the act of physically attending the Lobby to be counted is an important part of our democratic process. It helps to ensure engagement of MPs and I know many of us use the time to raise issues with other colleagues. However, the voting system in its current form is time consuming, particularly when there are multiple votes. With each Division taking around 20 minutes, if we have eight or nine Divisions, 650 MPs are left walking around in circles through the voting Lobbies over and over for hours on end. That is not an efficient use of 650 MPs' time.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I wish to place on record my agreement with my hon. Friend on that point. In my four short years as a Member I have spent more and more hours walking through the Lobby in multiple votes, especially in the complicated votes on Brexit. We should be here to take part in the debate, and physically present in the Lobby, but we should be able to speed up the process and vote electronically.

Ellie Reeves: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention.

I recall that, on the occasion of one of the EU votes, my Fitbit started buzzing because I had done 10,000 steps, but I had not left Parliament all day: I had just been walking in and out of the voting Lobby. It should not be like that. When we were voting on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—obviously an incredibly important issue—we were sometimes voting for nearly two hours, which is a long time and it could be done a lot more quickly. For many of us it is the difference between seeing our families that evening or not. As many will know, my son is a regular in the Lobbies. One vote at 7 pm means he can vote with me, but multiple votes means childcare having to be arranged and my not being able to see him that night.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend, and it is about not just Members but the staff of the House seeing their families and getting home.

Ellie Reeves: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will talk a bit more about that later. This is as much about those who work here as those sitting in the Chamber. Parliament is about a lot more than just us.

There are ways in which we could make the process take less time and be more efficient, while still observing and respecting parliamentary traditions. In recent years, the Clerks have moved from paper forms to recording votes on iPads. Using simple and straightforward technology, we could move to a system in which multiple votes can be registered at the same time. That would not be possible where votes are contingent on one another but, as they rarely are, it could significantly reduce the

time we spend voting. Not only would that be a far more efficient use of Members' time, but it would make a huge difference to those with caring responsibilities or suffering ill health.

In addition, the system of hundreds of Members queuing up to give their name to three Clerks can lead to long queues in the Lobbies, and colleagues have struggled at times with the cramped and claustrophobic conditions. I recall the evening of 15 January, when 432 Members formed a small crush to get into the No Lobby. Instead, we could have a series of electronic booths lined up in the Lobbies, which would speed up the process. It would be simpler, more efficient and, arguably, a lot more accessible.

Alongside the simplification of votes, it is important to look at the certainty of the parliamentary week. We live in extraordinary political times, and a degree of uncertainty and unpredictability will always come with that, but there must be a way to improve the system to provide some degree of routine and certainty to the parliamentary timetable.

At present, we organise our diaries week to week by finding out the next week's agenda in the business statement on a Thursday morning. If we have late votes on a Monday, it gives Members with caring or childcare responsibilities only one and a half working days to secure arrangements. This can be further complicated by the addition of urgent questions, ministerial statements, Standing Order No. 24 applications and protected time for debates.

Following publication of the "Good Parliament" report, I am delighted that the Women and Equalities Committee has just announced an inquiry into ensuring the House of Commons meets the needs of both men and women and how it can best address equality issues. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke may wish to speak on this in more detail but, 100 years since women were given the right to vote, only 32% of current Members are female, so it is vital that we use such inquiries not only to understand the barriers to greater female representation but to endeavour to remove them.

The inquiry's terms of reference mention the lack of predictability in, and advance knowledge of, parliamentary sitting patterns. The inquiry would welcome written submissions from anyone with experience of these issues. I hope that many Members will use this opportunity to highlight previous difficulties.

Even the smallest changes can have a big impact in giving certainty to those who work here. For example, the Leader of the House could attempt to provide a provisional fortnightly rundown of the business of the House. The past 20 years have seen widespread and welcome changes to parliamentary hours, and the days of all-night sittings are, thankfully, long gone, but we could look again at this area, perhaps through a Speaker's Conference, better to judge the feeling across the House.

Members whose families reside inside or outside London will have differing opinions on when is best for Parliament to sit and, although such conversations can be difficult, we should not shy away from having them in order to improve and modernise. We could equally consider deferring more Divisions or allocating set times for casting votes, particularly if lots of votes are to follow the moment of interruption, especially on Mondays when that comes at 10 pm. We could instead defer those

[*Ellie Reeves*]

Divisions to the next sitting day, for example, much as we do for other motions. That is not just for the benefit of Members; it would give Clerks, House staff and security personnel a better understanding of their working patterns. After all, this debate is as much about them as it is about us.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of certainty about things such as recess dates is a problem because it does not allow people to plan holidays if they have children at school? That causes huge problems not only for Members but for staff in this place.

Ellie Reeves: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pre-empting my next point. The cancellation of recesses this year will no doubt have had negative consequences for the work-life balance of those who help to facilitate the work of Parliament. Without the Clerks, Committee specialists, librarians, catering staff, security personnel, cleaners or the many others who make up the Westminster family, Parliament would grind to a halt and cease to work effectively. Many are restricted to taking time off when the House is in recess. The cancellation of two weeks of recess will no doubt have seen annual leave revoked, holidays cancelled and valuable time with friends and family postponed.

Moreover, I am aware that many of our recesses, although designed to coincide with school holidays, often reflect only London term times. While that is helpful for those who live in London, there are many MPs whose children's school holidays clash with when Parliament is sitting, placing additional pressure on those Members to arrange suitable childcare for those times. Parliament is often accused of being too London-centric, and although that is not always warranted, we should perhaps be more mindful of that in future when deciding recess dates.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I think that my hon. Friend knows that I fully support what she is saying, having brought up a very large family when the hours here were pretty terrible. Before she finishes, will she address the challenge we face in wanting to make this place more attractive and somewhere that a woman thinks it is possible to have a family and a proper life? A lot of women are being put off by the daftness of our routines.

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; I know that he cares strongly about these issues. Parliament is a fantastic place to work, and being a Member of Parliament is a real privilege. There has been lots of change but, as I have said, we should not stop there. We should always be looking at how to break down barriers, make this a more accessible workplace and encourage more and more people to enter.

Parliament has to work for everyone and be open to as many people as possible. For our representative democracy to be truly representative, we have to look outside to make sure that our practices fully reflect society. When I show constituents around Parliament, we often get on to the topic of prayer cards. Many are surprised that we still participate in daily Christian prayers. While I find the process of prayers at the start of the parliamentary day a calming influence and the

support of the Speaker's Chaplain invaluable, by limiting that part of our procedures to Christian beliefs only we are missing an opportunity to widen the appeal of Parliament and better reflect the country. I would fully welcome bringing other faith leaders into Parliament to offer a selection of readings that reflect the make-up of the communities that we represent. Likewise, for those of no religion, an apolitical "thought of the day" could be introduced. There is an opportunity here, too, to improve our customs better to reflect the world around us.

As I said earlier, while appetite for change varies from Member to Member, and while no one person has all the answers to improving how our parliamentary democracy works, it is clear that we must have more debates such as this to give Members a platform and an opportunity to express their views on how Parliament can best operate. It is undeniable that Westminster is often an outdated place. I am thankful for the previous efforts made by so many people to enhance and modernise our Parliament, including the Whips, who are always so understanding, particularly on childcare, but I acknowledge that they have to work within the existing frameworks.

As I hope I have made clear, this debate is not just about the work of Members. It is about making Parliament more modern and accessible for the thousands of other people who work on the parliamentary estate and those who wish to come here in future and make our democracy even more representative of those we seek to serve. Just as we needed the full transparency of proxy voting for those on parental leave, if we are to make Parliament a more modern, family-friendly and accessible workplace, we now need to make Divisions more straightforward and bring a degree of certainty to people's work routines. If we can continue these conversations and set about enacting positive change, we will see our democracy flourish and reach our goal of becoming the Parliament that truly reflects society as a whole.

3.29 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (*Ellie Reeves*) on securing this important debate, and I look forward to hearing the other contributions. I commend the work that has already been done, particularly, as she says, by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (*Ms Harman*), Mr Speaker and many others, including the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (*Andrea Leadsom*). I am sure that the new Leader of the House will be a valiant champion of the need to ensure that this is a good place to work in future.

We have to start this debate with some cold, hard facts. We know that we are a group of people who are hugely committed to our communities, and that we are professional, sensible people, but all too often this place can be portrayed as chaotic because of the way that we do, or do not, organise ourselves. That is not only down to the Government's motions and the Order Paper. We have to start to look at how this place looks from the outside if we really are to resolve the problems that we face in respect of this place, not only as a workplace for Members of Parliament, but as somewhere that represents our constituents.

Winston Churchill once said that
"we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us."

Never a truer word has been said of this place. I love this place and would never want to see Parliament move out of it, but we have to take it into account when we try to understand why it currently does not work as a workplace for so many people. The building was built for a time when this country was a very different place and very different people became Members of Parliament. How many people were wheelchair users back when this place was first built, or rebuilt after the fire? How many people were women? We know the answer to that one: absolutely none. This building was built and our procedures were set out when women and disabled people were not considered, and when dads had few responsibilities compared with those they have today. We have to take all these things into consideration as we move forward.

Mr Sheerman: The right hon. Lady is making an excellent point, as did the previous speaker, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), but both are MPs quite close to London. The Speaker once came to Huddersfield and spent a lovely day with me. When he got off the train, he said, “This is a long way, isn’t it?”. It is 192 miles. In some senses, the perspectives of those of who come to work here from a long distance away are qualitatively different from the perspectives of people who represent London and south-east England.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman has brought up an important point. Part of the problem we have is that each one of us is very different. I am a commuting MP, and my journey to and from this place takes an hour and 40 minutes. I am sure it does not take the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge an hour and 40 minutes to get home—I hope it does not; otherwise, she needs to have a chat with her Mayor of London. It is wrong to sweep us all into a “London and the south-east” bag and assume that we all have the same challenges. It is different for each of us.

Mr Sheerman: It is fundamental, though, is it not? We start at 2.30 pm on a Monday because people have to get here from Scotland and the north of England, flying, using rail and so on, and these days we finish early on a Thursday because people have to get back to their constituencies. We are moulded a bit by the distances that many of us are from Parliament.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that those are factors to consider. In fact, one reason why I was not going to talk about start and finish times was that it is a specific discussion. If he will allow me to take issue slightly with what he said, I feel that certainty is far more important. We can all cope with a lot of things in life as long as we know what is going on. All too often, the chaos that I mentioned feels very real, not just to us and staff in our parliamentary offices, but to members of staff here. I have been asked a number of times in the Tea Room, “Ms Miller, do you know when the vote might come?”. People want to be able to plan their days. The way in which this place is organised, and particularly the use of urgent questions, is a real problem for us, but I will come on to that in more detail in a moment.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD) *rose*—

Mrs Miller: Of course I give way to the right hon. Gentleman. I hope that Madam Deputy Speaker will not take a dim view of my allowing interventions.

Tom Brake: Does the right hon. Lady agree that another factor that must be taken into account is whether the Government of the day have a majority? She was elected in 2005, and I suspect that between 2005 and 2015, there was a degree of stability in people’s ability to plan work, because successive Governments had a majority. When that is not the case, things become much more unpredictable.

Mrs Miller: I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point, but it is not the point that I am making. He is right that there is an unpredictability when we have to deal with enormous issues such as Brexit. I suppose that I am talking about the things that we can control that we are not controlling, and that, I think, is part of a modern workplace. I will come on to that in a bit more detail.

We all agree that being a Member of this place is an immense honour, but that does not mean that we have to keep it in a time warp. Sometimes we feel the great pressure of the history of this place. We may not want to challenge what has gone before for fear of being seen to be disrespectful of it. We must acknowledge that that is a pressure on each of us as Members, perhaps in different ways.

Modernisation would help us to attract new and different people to being Members of Parliament. Yes, perhaps it would attract more women, more disabled people or people with younger children, but it would be people who want a less chaotic and more certain place in which to work—a place to which they feel they can contribute.

There is a much more fundamental issue here for all of us, regardless of our gender, sexuality or ethnicity. If we thought about this place in a more focused way, it would help us to retain Members of Parliament. This place is at its best when we have Members who have been here for many years as well as Members who are brand new, because that gives a perspective on procedure, debate and the history of this place. We need to work far harder at retaining MPs. Women in particular move away from this place far too soon. It would also help us to support better our staff in our parliamentary offices, and those parliamentary staff who support us so freely and so well. We have a responsibility to act to make sure that this is a modern workplace.

Another more fundamental issue that I will place on the table for others to comment on is trust in Parliament. We can take this debate today at a very superficial level—as being about women with children, childcare and nurseries—but it is also about how much trust people have in a workplace that looks more akin to the 18th century than the 21st.

The Brexit process has challenged people’s trust not just in parliamentarians, but in the nature of Parliament. We need to keep that in mind as we move forward and think very carefully about the challenge that the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge has put on the table today. We cannot continually kick into the long grass the need to modernise this place and to get to grips with some of the issues set out by her, me, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake).

Some of the groundwork has been done with “The Good Parliament” guide, and I think that all of us would want to put on record our sincere thanks to Professor Sarah Childs for what she has done. Some of those changes, as

[Mrs Miller]

the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge said, have come into play. The nursery is very important, not just for us, but for our staff. My staff use that nursery, and I can keep great staff, which I might not otherwise have been able to do, because we have that nursery.

Proxy voting is long overdue, but being modern is not just about people who have small babies. My very small babies are now very large babies; in fact, the youngest is 17. It is actually even more difficult—you might have some sympathy with this, Madam Deputy Speaker—to look after a 12-year-old, if you have no childcare, when you are trying to go and vote or have been called in for a meeting during a recess. On more than one occasion, my children were parked with a policeman at the back of the Speaker's Chair—thank goodness for those policemen providing that help and support—because nothing else was available. As we think of modernisation, we must think more roundly about the pressures on our lives at times other than those very important times when we have small children, and that we think about buildings and procedures hand in hand.

I hope that this debate will make us feel that we need a clear plan for moving forward. I pay tribute to Sarah Childs for her report. I pay tribute to the work that the Speaker has done, the work done by the Commons reference group on representation and inclusion, and all the other elements of work that has been going on, including, obviously, around the Cox report. Many, many different things are happening, but to me it all feels very fragmented. As somebody who is incredibly interested in this issue, I have found it very difficult to keep up with what is really going on. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, who is on the Commission, will of course know far more than I do, and will be on top of it all, but it can be very difficult for many of us to know the long-term vision for this House as a modern workplace.

It feels very much as though—this is meant not as a criticism, but as an observation of fact—modernisation is being considered in quite a piecemeal way. We need to think about the risks that that poses to our being able to hold people to account for delivery of modernisation. We need to have clear managerial responsibility for modernisation. At the end of this debate, who will be responsible for making sure that the things we have talked about actually happen? I do not think it should be the Leader of the House, because he is also part of Government—it should be wider than that. We need to think about the procedures and the processes in play.

One immediate and very deep concern that I have is for the mental health of our parliamentary and constituency staff, and of Members of Parliament, because the chaotic approach and uncertainty that I mentioned are well-known triggers for mental health problems. If we do not act quite swiftly on this, we are at risk of being widely criticised for not acting. Constant uncertainty has an impact. We do not know when debates will start every day, because we do not know how many urgent questions there will be. We think, “Does that mean I will have to cancel or move meetings?” Of course, it is not just us who do that—it is also our parliamentary staff. Some Members who do not have parliamentary staff here have to do it themselves. It is a very inefficient use of time.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge highlighted inefficiencies around voting, but I would say that the issue is much more widespread than that. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington talked about Brexit. Yes, that has certainly brought a lot more unpredictability into the system, but we could take control of a great deal of that unpredictability and that chaotic feel.

I call on those who are able to influence these matters to hold an urgent review of the House timetable. I would be interested in the Leader of the House's comments. He is relatively new to the post, but I am sure that he already has well-formed views on these things. Could we, for instance, put urgent questions before questions and debates? If these questions are so urgent, let us have them before we start the day. As the hon. Member for Huddersfield said, most Members of Parliament are here in London. The vast majority are not like me, commuting on the train. We could therefore perhaps have urgent questions at 8.30 am, before the day starts, so that they do not disrupt the flow of Members' days—or perhaps from 9.30 am to 10.30 am, to help people with caring responsibilities. That would be a way forward. It seems straightforward to me; I am not sure why we do not do it.

When I joined this place, I had three children, the youngest of whom was three. I have a husband, and I care for two elderly parents who live with me. I am a living and breathing sandwich generation person, and I do not think we speak up enough for sandwich generation people. We often hear people with young children talk, but we do not hear those with caring responsibilities talk enough. I believe greatly that we should all do more to look after our elderly and ailing parents. As well as talking about nurseries, we need to talk about elder care issues, for not only ourselves but our members of staff.

We need a Parliament to be proud of, that attracts the best to stand for election and to be members of staff here, regardless of their age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or caring responsibilities. Our building, procedures, culture and philosophy here are hugely important—they shape our Parliament, but what should also shape our Parliament is the people we represent. How does a young woman who comes here to visit me feel when I take her into Committee Room 14, which I love, and she sees no women on the wall, just a group of extremely old men? How does any person from a black and minority ethnic background feel about how representative this Parliament is of them when they see nobody of any minority ethnic background on the walls? I will probably now be corrected; there will be someone somewhere. How does a wheelchair user feel when they have to use the service lift to get around?

We need to take all those issues into account when we talk about restoration and renewal. How do people feel when their meetings with their MP are cancelled at a moment's notice because three urgent questions are granted on the day, with little notice, causing the sort of chaos that we now see daily?

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I apologise for not having been here for the beginning of the debate; I hope I am not being discourteous. I am listening carefully to my right hon. Friend, and I agree strongly with most of what she says. However, I am concerned about her suggestion of having urgent questions at some other time than when the House is sitting. Surely the whole

point of an urgent question is that a Member of Parliament—a Back Bencher—can raise an urgent matter, and the Speaker may or may not allow that to occur. If there is a special slot for UQs at some time other than when the House is sitting, surely they would lose their entire purpose.

Mrs Miller: My hon. Friend is right. I suppose I am suggesting that we would sit from half-past 9. Moving towards a more nine-to-five approach to our day here would not only be better for people who live in London; this place would then look a little bit more like everybody else's workplace. I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington experiences the same thing, but when I am on the train in the morning, my constituents say, "Why were you on the train at 20 minutes past 10 on Monday night? That can't be a very effective use of your time." I am not particularly suggesting that we should have urgent questions when the House is not sitting. I am just suggesting that we need to think about organising them into the day, so that they do not continually create a sense of chaos, with no one knowing when debates will start or finish.

Mr Sheerman: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way again; she is being very kind. She has paid a lot of tributes, but I hope she does not mind me saying that she has missed one. Having been in this place a long time, I know that it became civilised because women came here. I do not want to use the "B" word too often, because I will get a bad reputation, but Tony Blair made a hell of a difference to this place. He helped to increase the number of women in this place, and women have changed it a lot since 1997. There is much more to do, but we should put it on the record that women have already civilised this place almost unrecognisably from when I was a young MP.

Mrs Miller: That is an interesting reflection. Having a broader range of people in Parliament, regardless of gender, would also have a civilising effect, but I tend to agree. It is nice to have a Parliament that resembles the constituencies we represent.

This is such an important debate—perhaps even more so than the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge intimated. It is about trust in this place, because if this place does not look like anything else and does not act in an apparently professional and organised manner, we undermine our constituents' trust in a place that is there to represent them and their views. Parliament enables us to serve our constituents, and we need to ensure, in planning for the future, that this is a place they can relate to and is accessible for them. Right now, we can make real change quite quickly and create far more certainty in our days by stopping the use of UQs at the beginning of the day to delay, amend or sometimes even obliterate debate completely because of the number that have been granted.

I will close my remarks there, but reflecting what the hon. Member for Huddersfield said a few moments ago, let me say that when I first met you, Madam Deputy Speaker, you said: "Women in this place have to work twice as hard as men, because we are still not 50% of the people here." You are absolutely right, and hon. Ladies will know that. Part of my contribution to the debate was really to reflect on the comment you made to me all those years ago. We do need far more women here to have the civilising influence that the hon. Gentleman was talking about.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am delighted to hear the right hon. Lady say that. The situation has improved somewhat since those days, but it has a long way to go. I can say that with the impartiality of the Chair, because I do not think there is anyone who will disagree.

3.50 pm

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): First, I ought to mention that when I applied to speak in this debate, I told Mr Speaker that I might have to leave the debate slightly early, and I apologised for that—ironically, for family reasons.

I want to speak mainly about the accessibility part of this debate, but I will mention one or two other things briefly. When the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned that there are no ethnic minority portraits in the Palace, she said somebody would stand up and correct her, and that is what I am going to do. I have seen one, and that is Shapurji Saklatvala, who was the MP for Battersea North a long time ago, before the war. He is one, but what about David Pitt or Learie Constantine, who were both Members of the House of Lords? I have seen no illustrations of them. In particular, Learie Constantine was a giant of 20th-century politics. His actions led to the first Race Relations Act in the 1960s, among many other things, and he was the first non-white peer to be appointed, again in the 1960s. There is no recognition of Learie Constantine or, for that matter, of David Pitt, who equally made a great contribution.

I want to mention one other thing before I move on to accessibility. To this day, it is more difficult for women to be MPs, particularly if they are travelling from a long way away from Parliament. I can remember one example. I will not name this particular individual because she is a friend of mine, and I have not warned her that I was going to mention it. When I was first elected in 1997, I remember one of the many women elected in that intake, who was a terrific MP and a great speaker. If anybody in this Chamber saw her speak, they would have thought that woman was going places—that she was going to be in a future Cabinet, or whatever. She had small children and a constituency about 100 miles from Parliament, and within weeks she said to me, "I'm going to do one term, and then I'm off. I just cannot juggle everything I've got to do with the hours." Some things have improved, but many of them still have a long way to go.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend, because of his family history, knows about this subject better than almost anybody I know. I was a friend of his father and I am still a friend of his mother, who had adjoining constituencies to mine. He will know, because he has that dual perspective, how different it is being a Member of Parliament with a constituency in, say, Yorkshire—a long way away—and being a London MP. If we are going to modernise this House, we have to balance the two very carefully indeed.

John Cryer: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think things have changed to a large extent. He mentioned my dad, who was an MP here in the 1970s, when there were all-night sittings. From 1974 to 1979, just on our side of the House, we lost 17 MPs in five years from

[John Cryer]

heart attacks, strokes, haemorrhages and all the rest of it. Things have changed, but as I have said, they still have a long way to go.

Tom Brake: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Might the colleague he mentioned have benefited from job sharing for Members of Parliament, if that was something we had introduced?

John Cryer: That would be quite tricky to introduce—we could probably have a whole week of debates about such things, so I will not dwell on that.

Let me move on to accessibility. We all have disabled constituents—members of local associations, Liberal Democrat organisations, or constituency Labour parties—who come to see us, often in wheelchairs. They find it difficult to get in and out of the Palace of Westminster, despite the efforts of staff who work hard to make things as easy and accessible as possible for those with disabilities. A lot of community groups, particularly Afro-Caribbean community groups, tend to have an older age profile with members who often walk with difficulty or are in wheelchairs, and who find it difficult to get in and out of the supposed mother of Parliaments.

Some years ago I was not an MP but a trade union officer. I was the political officer for what was then the Transport and General Workers Union and is now Unite the union. It is the biggest union in the country, and has a large number of disabled members. I remember organising a lobby, and as usual with lobbies the meeting took place on the main Committee corridor. We were campaigning to keep the Remploy factories open, and the industrial officer who organised that lobby with me was Jennie Formby, now general secretary of the Labour party—I still work with her. There was only a small group of people in wheelchairs, but I vividly remember it taking an hour and a half to take those people from the Committee corridor to Carriage Gates where they could get in cabs. Even getting people picked up in cabs was tricky—it was not just about getting them from the corridor to Carriage Gates.

This is supposedly a people's Parliament, but if a large section of the population cannot easily get in and out, can it really be that? We must change things. I am not sure exactly how we should change them in a building such as this, which, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke said, was built in a different era and for very different needs, but they must change. We must be able to get people who have serious or lesser disabilities in and out of Parliament, so that they can get to Central Lobby, Westminster Hall, the Committee corridor and the upper Committee corridor. If we cannot do that when work takes place over the next few years, we will struggle to call it a people's Parliament.

3.37 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for securing this important debate, and other colleagues for their contributions.

I wanted to speak in this debate because I think there are two purposes to the drive to continue the reform of Parliament. The first is to ensure that Parliament is as

attractive a workplace as possible for as many people as possible. I am always disappointed when, either on a school visit or in my constituency, I ask people to put their hands up if they would like to take over from me as the next Member of Parliament for Bristol North West, and there are very few people—this includes young children and people at my coffee mornings or my constituency pub politics—who want to do that. I am sure there are a whole host of reasons why people might not want to become a Member of Parliament, but it is a huge shame for this Parliament and for our country.

One of those reasons—this is true especially for women, because even with hands-on fathers such as myself, women still bear the burden of child caring responsibilities, as does my wife, who I pay tribute to today—is that people see the chaos. People see the lack of planning, the living in two locations, and think, “How on earth could I do the school run or deal with nursery?” As I am now learning, with multiple children that becomes even harder. We must continue to reform this place so that it is somewhere to which people from across the spectrum of our community wish to come and contribute, and answer that public service calling. People need a workplace that works for them and their family.

I should also make the case for fathers. As I said, my wife still bears the childcare burden because of the inflexibility of what happens in this place, and I am disappointed by that. We should always remember that dads want to spend time with their children and families as well, and in this modern age people should be able to balance those obligations with their choice of career. Many of my peers who work in business or in other organisations increasingly take employment and career choices that mean they have more flexibility to be with their families: maybe not working on Fridays, taking an early or a late finish to be able to do the school run, or being in an annualised hours position where they can take school holidays off. Many of our wives are successful people in their own careers. We want to be able to help them and contribute to raising our families, so that they can pursue their careers alongside us.

Parliament has an important role in setting the tone, not just in the delivery of democracy in this House but in what we as a Parliament expect from the wider economy. There have been many debates in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall about the impact of difficulties around childcare, family choices and practices in the workplace: the fact that dads are not having access to shared parental leave because it will have an impact on their career, and the “mummy track” impact on mums, losing the salary and seniority they deserve as a consequence of caring for children. We need to be saying that we want reform in this place, as well as in the wider economy. We should set the tone here and then legislate, through the Government, to ensure that the same is the case for the wider country.

We should give thanks, as other hon. Members have, for the progress that has been made. As a new Member, I did not know that the nursery in 1 Parliament Street used to be a wine bar. That was news to me. Apparently there was a debate about whether we needed one fewer pub in this place. I do not know why we have a pub at all. I know that might be a controversial statement, but I have never had one in my workplaces before. A nursery seems perfectly sensible, and I welcome that.

I benefited from proxy voting after the birth of my second daughter, Edie, when I was able to proxy vote via my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). There was a clear distinction between the arrival of my first and my second. My first daughter, Ophelia, was born when we were having crunch votes on Brexit. My phone was ringing in the delivery suite, asking whether I was available to vote. I was allowed off the Whip on that occasion, but in the immediate days after the arrival of my daughter, when a father wants to be at home to help and contribute, I had to come back and forth to vote. Proxy voting has solved that, but—this was mentioned in the debate on proxy voting, because I was here for it—dads are able to benefit from proxy voting for only two weeks. If I want to take more time in a shared parental leave setting, as I could do in a workplace outside of here, I am unable to do so. That is one example of why the case for reform and modernisation needs to continue.

I should pay tribute and thanks. There are, of course, some benefits to raising a family here in Parliament. I shall just share a short story, which is loosely related to the topic today. My wife took my two daughters to see her sister-in-law in Washington DC recently. Of course, to take children on to a plane they need passports. It was very easy to get my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge, as someone with standing in our community, to sign the passport documents to authorise that my daughters are real. Sadly, my hon. Friend forgot to put her passport number on the form. My wife went to the passport office. I was in the constituency, an example of having to live in two locations, and received a call from my wife in distress. It was the last date to be able to get the passports sorted, otherwise the trip would have to be cancelled. My hon. Friend was in her constituency being busy, too.

Much to our relief, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) turned up at the passport office here in London and filled in the form in place of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge, until he realised that he had lost his passport, which was why he was there, and could not sign off the form. To the rescue was my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), the husband of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge. Between the chair of the parliamentary Labour party, the shadow Chancellor and two Labour MPs, we solved the passport problem. Why on earth we could not just put a form in the post like every other family, I have no idea.

On that note, Madam Deputy Speaker, I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge on securing this debate. I congratulate other right hon. and hon. Members on continuing the push for reform at pace, to make this a place where mums and dads who want children and want to be able to spend time with their family will come and contribute to the public service and leadership of our country, so that together we can lead that change for the economy, too.

4.4 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on this excellent debate. It is sad that it is not more broadly attended because it is an important topic. As a Member of Parliament who has to spend

anywhere between 10 and 15 hours a week travelling to and from my constituency, I was grateful to hear of the great experiences that others have who travel shorter distances.

Members have made important contributions. The late and much-missed Jo Cox said that we in Westminster “are behind the curve compared with working practice in much of industry, and the charitable and public sectors, and that is a problem... if we act differently and change the culture and working practices here, we can change how others operate. We should do that, because we are here to change and improve the United Kingdom.”—[*Official Report*, 10 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 46WH.]

I could not agree more. If we are to make laws and policies that are forward thinking and progressive, we must get our own house in order.

When I came to this place, I could not help thinking it was a cross between Downton Abbey and Hogwarts. I know people have great affection for the Houses of Parliament, but there is no doubt it is stuck in the past. It is steeped in great history, but it is not forward looking enough. It has a rich history of failing to be a workplace that is anywhere near as functional or inclusive as it should be. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) spoke of his shock and surprise when he arrived here to see how many pubs there were. I shared that experience.

Of the many places I have ever worked—the corporate industry, the energy sector, other MPs’ offices, foreign Governments—the only place I have seen something similar is the media. I started at Good Morning Television the year after the last pub in the building had been closed, and it was closed for a very good reason. People often visit us here in our workplace—for example, we bring constituents into this place—and it is still a mystery to me that there are so many pubs and places to buy alcohol and that alcohol is served during the day at receptions.

None the less, progress has been made. When we introduced proxy voting, I think we all breathed a sigh of relief. It has been interesting to hear from male colleagues whose partners have recently had babies or are about to have them and who have missed out on proxy voting but who will now benefit from it. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has just introduced a proposal for extended parental leave for those who have premature babies. That is a sensible proposal that I hope the Minister will consider.

Dame Laura Cox’s report last October concluded that a

“culture of deference, subservience, acquiescence and silence”

was enabling abuses of power and the mistreatment of colleagues to go unchecked. It should not have taken one of our colleagues having to come here in a wheelchair on the day she was due to give birth to force proxy voting through. She was incredibly brave in what she did—she stood by her principles—and it is because of her that we have finally taken that step forward.

We have heard many stories about an endemic culture that normalises bullying and harassment, which continue to permeate our politics. That is the sad reality of decades and centuries of ancient tradition in this place. We have plans to refurbish this place. It is predicted to cost between £4 billion and £6 billion of taxpayers’ money just to bring this place and the other place up to standard.

[*Hannah Bardell*]

The Scottish Parliament, which will shortly celebrate its 20th anniversary, cost a little under half a billion pounds. We could build between eight and 10 Scottish Parliaments for the cost of the refurbishment. Some argue that this place would be better turned into a museum and that we could build a new Parliament in another part of the UK.

Mrs Miller: I did not want to stop the hon. Lady's flow, but she referred earlier to the Cox report and the grievance procedures. I hope that she will have noted that we have secured a short debate on the Floor of the House next Tuesday to press for progress in those areas. I hope that she will be able to support that debate.

Hannah Bardell: The right hon. Lady has read my mind, because I was coming to that. I am glad to see that among the threadbare business for next week there will be an update on that important piece of work. It is very important that we move that forward. I commend her on the important work that she and the Women and Equalities Committee, which she chairs, have done on this. She said that the Brexit process had challenged people's trust in politics and in this place. I agree with that and would go further: it has exposed the crumbling relic of a democratic institution that this place is. We face the prospect of having a candidate for Prime Minister who wants to prorogue Parliament and have a no-deal Brexit, which will have a devastating impact. How will we get public trust if we cannot even have proper business and legislation in this place?

The right hon. Lady talked about the built environment and the paintings around this place. I have had the good fortune to sit on the Speaker's Advisory Committee on Works of Art, and it has been a privilege to do so and particularly to see the work that has been done on the 209 Women project. I commend all those involved in that project, but during that period, I learned that 25 times more money had been spent over the past 20 years on buying pictures of men for this place than had been spent on buying pictures of women. Let us not forget that the photographs of the female parliamentarians who took part in the 209 Women project were taken by female photographers, who were not paid, which is a really important point. When we are trying to support women and their work, we must remember that they should be properly recognised. Without radical changes to this place to make it more inclusive, we will not properly reflect society.

We have made significant strides. We are the gayest Parliament in the world, or one of the gayest, and I am proud to be a woman who is gay in this place. When I stood for election and for selection, I stood against four men. I looked at the line-up and thought, "Why do I want to do this? Why do I want to go up against four men to go to a place that is very male dominated?" I did it because I wanted to be part of the change that I know many young women cannot see.

In Scotland, we have also made significant strides. We have a gender-balanced Cabinet. When Nicola Sturgeon became First Minister, she was one of only a handful of leaders in the world to do that. It is really important that we have politicians who are hard-working, relatable and can bring their personal experiences to this place. We saw that in the most recent election. There are Members across this House with a vast array of life experiences,

but we have to make sure that we have that not just in Parliament and its elected representatives, but in our media. I often look up at the Press Gallery, at the press who are looking down at us, and I do not see many female faces or people of colour. It is really important that we have people reporting on our politics who are as diverse as possible.

We have had contributions from Members who have spoken about access to this place. If this building was being built from scratch today, there is absolutely no way in which it would meet health and safety standards. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge talked about the voting system. We have proxy voting, but electronic voting would save us a huge amount of time. On the last count that I did, which was in March, I calculated that we had spent 205 hours—five and a half working weeks—just voting. Given that Parliament sits for only 35 or 36 weeks a year, a huge amount of time is being wasted just on voting. Nobody is arguing that we should not be here debating and voting. That is extremely important, but, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) said, perhaps we could have an allotted time for urgent questions and have predictability in our business, particularly when we have people travelling from our constituencies, businesses and other organisations to come to see us in Parliament. Having to cancel meetings at the last minute and not being able to get back for children's events and caring responsibilities is a ridiculous situation. There is no other such employment anywhere. We do our constituents an injustice, and in my view we cannot properly represent them and their issues when there is such a lack of predictability, progress and activity from a legislative perspective. Brexit has dominated so much of the legislative timetable that it has created and exposed the inadequacies of the system.

I understand that people like the banter and to have a wee chat in the voting Lobbies, but for goodness' sake, we live in a modern world. We should be able to have those meetings and engage with one another. It just exposes the inaccessibility of the Government and the inability to get answers from them that people feel the need to use the time in the voting Lobbies just to corner other people, because they cannot get the proper responses, meetings and time that they feel they need.

Tom Brake: I want to use this opportunity to draw to the attention of the hon. Lady and other Members present to the fantastic opportunity that we have with the Northern Estate programme, as part of which we shall build a, I think badly named, temporary Chamber—a Chamber that could in fact be permanent. If we cannot get reform here—which is quite difficult to do, because there is a certain amount of inertia—we should make sure that for that temporary Chamber, which we will be sitting in from about 2025 onwards, those issues are at the very least tested, so that if they are successful, they can be reintroduced here when we come back to a new Palace of Westminster in 2031 or thereabouts.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that important point. However, if I am still here in 2031 and Scotland is not an independent country, I will eat my hat, quite literally. The thought that I would still be having to come to this place horrifies me.

We do not have a seat in the Chamber for every Member. So many times I have heard people argue, "We need to queue up and vote in the Lobbies because

people need to be here for the debate,” yet we can only fit half the Members of this place into this Chamber to listen to a debate. For goodness’ sake—it is common sense. Let us have a Chamber that is big enough. I know of so few Parliaments—I have been in Parliaments all over the world, including Malawi at the beginning of last year—that do not have electronic voting. The European Parliament and the Council of Europe have it, as do the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is not difficult, so for goodness’ sake, let us just get on and do it.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), in a recent speech, made a point about half terms and summer breaks. She included reference to experiences in Scotland. In parts of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the recesses do not match up to the holidays. I have colleagues who sometimes have an overlap of less than 10 days, so they cannot even get a break with their families. I am in no doubt that we have a huge amount of privilege being in this place, and this is not about having a rant and a moan; it is about saying to our constituents, “Look, we could do a much better job for you, and a much better job by you, and more people—women—from across the social and the economic spectrum could be encouraged into this place if it had a proper, modern working ethic.”

I shall finish by reflecting on some of the experiences of my staff, many of whom have been with me since I was first elected. About the end of 2015, we started an all-party group on deaths abroad and consular services, because we had two constituents—women—who had been killed abroad in suspicious circumstances. Since then, we have taken evidence from about 60 families across the UK who have lost loved ones abroad. That has been a harrowing and deeply distressing experience for me and my staff—nothing like the experience that those families have had, but none the less the vicarious trauma that my staff and I have experienced has been significant.

We have worked with the parliamentary authorities to get the right emotional support, and it has become very clear to me that there is not appropriate emotional support for staff members. All our staff members do an incredible job, and they often have to deal with distressing and difficult constituency work. We must do much more, through the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the other authorities, to ensure that our staff get the proper support when they come to work for an MP, because we are all individual employers and we have a very important responsibility to our staff to ensure that they are properly protected. They will be able to serve our constituents properly only if they get the right support, and this place will be a modern Parliament that can properly reflect all parts of the UK and all people who live in it only if we can make it a modern and sensible working place.

4.18 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): There are some heavyweight names attached to the motion: that of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), who opened the debate with an outstanding, wide-ranging speech. It was right to bring this matter to our attention and to keep it on the agenda.

Before my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) goes off to do his bit in childcare, I have to say that it is good to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge has dispatched him to do that. It would be interesting to hear from him on what it was like to be the child of an MP. It certainly did not put him off. He was also an older child of another MP—both his father and his mother were Members of Parliament. It is good to see him in his place, but we accept that he has other duties to go and do.

Many Members are probably not aware that the sitting time changes were thanks to Dame Joan Ruddock, who pulled together a group of cross-party Members. We consulted and voted on the various proposed times. It is pleasing that the Health Secretary, a hands-on-dad, was also involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) was part of a group of new MPs, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge, who contributed to an important Fabian Society pamphlet about change. I wrote the introduction. I did not agree with all the suggestions in the pamphlet, but it was good to see that new Members were proposing changes.

A number of reports have been published. Many Members have referred to “The Good Parliament” by Professor Sarah Childs, which was commissioned by the Speaker and published as long ago as 2016. Its 43 recommendations address three parliamentary dimensions. Even before its publication, people were making trivial remarks such as “Oh, it is about everyone using the same toilet.” Professor Childs had to arrange many meetings to try to convince people that hers was a serious and hard-hitting report.

As I have said, the report identified three parliamentary dimensions. The first was “Equality and Participation”, which asked

“how a diverse group of MPs might be selected for, and elected to, Parliament”.

The second, “Parliamentary Infrastructure”,

“covers everything from the buildings and furniture of Parliament to the official rules and working practices”.

The third, “Commons Culture”, looked beyond the formal rules to examine the parliamentary culture and its effect on diversity.

Who selects parliamentary candidates is a matter for the parties. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who is not present at the moment, has put the responsibility for all-women shortlists squarely on Tony Blair. I would say to him that many members of the Labour party, women and men, fought long and hard to secure all-women shortlists. As a result, 49% of the parliamentary Labour party are women. That movement rose from the grassroots to the higher echelons of the party, and 1997, when so many women were elected to Parliament, was an important milestone.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Lady agree that some fantastic organisations are working to improve diversity in the House, notably Operation Black Vote? I mention OBV by way of an apology to her and to the Leader of the House, because I have to attend an event that it is hosting here this afternoon. The event will finish by 5 pm, and if I do not leave I will miss the opportunity to support and, perhaps, mentor a person from OBV to ensure that people from ethnic minorities are better represented in the House.

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and I congratulate Sir Simon Woolley on his elevation in the Queen's birthday honours. It is well deserved. I mentored someone from Operation Black Vote last year. It has an incredibly good set of people who come from different backgrounds; the person whom I mentored worked in social care. That is the kind of organisation that we need to have.

I do not know if you are aware of this, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the Commissions of both Houses have responded to the UK gender-sensitive parliament audit, the first ever such audit produced in the UK. The Commissions are monitoring and publishing annual progress against four of the audit's priority recommendations. The kind of recommendations that they are prioritising are

"Developing a parliamentary policy for children and families",
informed by good practice in other Parliaments;

"responding to the Cox report, and...forthcoming inquiries"

on bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct; awareness
of the support available to MPs, peers and staff

"to address abuse and threats via social media";

and making information

"more readily available on the different groups or organisations in
Parliament with specialist knowledge...and clearly signposted"

in order to

"support parliamentarians to take account of gender impacts in
their work".

We are pleased that the monitoring will continue.

Many Members have mentioned restoration and renewal, which gives us an opportunity to focus on the physical aspects. We need to make life much easier for people with disabilities or hearing difficulties. In new buildings such as Portcullis House, it is much easier for those with hearing difficulties to hear people. Everything possible has to be done to make Parliament accessible.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke is right: a number of reports are coming out and we must make sure we do not lose sight of any of them. They need to be pulled together; the House authorities are aware of that, and certainly the Clerk of the House has his eye on how they will all pull together.

Mrs Miller: I have a genuine question: the Clerk of the House is not responsible to Members here; how do we solve that problem? It is very difficult for Members to know who is responsible for these things, because the Clerk cannot come to the Floor of the House.

Valerie Vaz: I did not mean that they were responsible; ultimately it is a matter for the Commission to pull those reports together. Reports will come to the Commission and will then be disseminated. I do not know whether the right hon. Lady is aware of this, but many of the responses given to the Commission are disseminated; if she checks her inbox and the parliamentary intranet she will see that everything that goes on in the Commission is published, as are any reports that need to be brought to people's attention.

There is political will on this. It is not just a matter for the Leader of the House and the Opposition parties. We will work together, but certainly the Commission is the governing body at this stage, until things change—if they do; and if people want a more accountable

Commission, that is what will happen. At present, however, these matters are for the parties nominated to the Commission, and the Clerk of the House. It is not for individual MPs to take it on themselves to do these things, although I have to say that when individual MPs have good ideas and take them to various places such as the Commission, they come to fruition. The right hon. Lady sat on the Speaker's reference Committee; I know she is not on it currently, but that shows that there are good things that people can pull together. Things can and do happen.

Mrs Miller: Does the hon. Lady think the current House of Commons Commission is accountable, and if not would she support change?

Valerie Vaz: Well, we are all elected, and we are all appointed by our parties; we also have two non-executives who sit—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Lady says we are appointed, but the Leader of the House and I are on it by virtue of our parties through the usual channels; that is the way it works. I am sure she is not casting any aspersions on the previous or current Leader of the House. It is an interesting way of working. The Clerks—the House authorities—have to be responsible for the way the House operates, and then things are done through the Commission. The fact that we have a Commission is very good. I sat on the House of Commons Governance Committee; we heard evidence on how things it works, and things changed as a result of that. There is an opportunity, if Members wish, to have another House of Commons Governance Committee—whether the Leader of the House and I would be on it, I do not know. The work is disseminated, however, as the right hon. Lady will see if she checks the intranet.

Of course we also have the Cox report, and Alison Stanley has now reported on whether the independent complaints and grievance scheme works. Her report makes for interesting reading. A unit has been tasked with implementing some work. We have a newly appointed independent director of cultural transformation, Julie Harding, who is doing town hall meetings with staff and trying to understand what goes on in order to get cultural change, and that will continue.

In a previous debate, I said I did not know what was happening to Professor Sarah Childs' recommendations, and suggested that we do what is normally done to keep track of projects: have a Gantt chart, on which we collect all the recommendations. As the right hon. Lady is Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I wonder if she might look at the report three years on, and commission a further inquiry on where we are on Professor Sarah Childs' report and how many recommendations have been actioned. People thought the proxy voting was going to be difficult, but it has been as smooth as possible and works really well.

The right hon. Lady's Committee produced a report on women in the House in January 2017, and I notice that the Government rejected all six of the recommendations in their response in September. One recommendation was that all the parties should aim for 45% of their Members of Parliament to be women. Her Committee also said that section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 should be implemented. The Government responded that they did not want to do that, and that they would rather just talk to the political parties, but I wonder if

the Leader of the House could take that away and look at it, and perhaps report back at a later date. Many hon. Members have touched on the fact that we are becoming a diverse Parliament. I have to say that 31 of the 52 minority ethnic Members are from the Labour party; 19 are from the Conservatives, one is from the Lib Dems and one from the Independent Group. Exactly half are women, so we are getting it right on that score.

Another important report, “Race in the workplace” by Baroness McGregor-Smith, was published on 28 February 2017. It found that people are still being held back in the workplace because of the “colour of their skin”, which is costing the UK economy the equivalent of 1.3% of GDP a year. She said that if black and minority ethnic people progressed in the workplace at the same rate as their white counterparts, the UK economy could be boosted by £24 billion. The McGregor-Smith review made 26 recommendations. One urged the Government to create a free online unconscious bias training resource that would be available to everyone in the UK, and to develop a simple guide on how to discuss race in the workplace. Two years on from that review, I ask the Government and the Leader of House to assess where we are on that. As Baroness McGregor-Smith said:

“The time for talking is over. Now is the time to act.”

More importantly, on 28 February 2017, the Government launched a business, diversity and inclusion group to bring together business leaders and organisations to develop ways of removing barriers in the workplace and monitoring employees’ progress. The then Business Minister, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), chaired the group. She immediately wrote to the FTSE 350 companies, asking them to drive increased diversity in the workplace and to take up the McGregor-Smith review, but sadly there are still just six women chief executive officers in the FTSE 100 companies. More needs to be done. According to a recent report by Green Park, there are only five BAME CEOs in FTSE 100 companies, and 48 FTSE 100 companies had no ethnic minority presence on their boards in 2018.

Hon. Members will know that we always talk about the gender pay gap, and that is important because this Parliament not only looks at itself but also looks outside. A key figure shows that in 2018 women worked for free for 51 days of the year because of the gender pay gap. We must close that gap as soon as possible. We Labour Members feel that we have a proud record on progressing women’s rights. We brought in the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Equality Act 2010 and the minimum wage, and we introduced Sure Start. Our shadow Cabinet is nearly 50% women, and we hope that that will continue. The important thing is that many people outside this place perhaps cannot afford the things that we can, such as their own workplace nursery. If we were to implement our policies, the extension of the 30 hours of free childcare would make an important difference to women in the workplace generally, whether or not they ended up in here, and families on the lowest incomes would be eligible for additional subsidised hours on top of the 30 hours.

It is vital that we make this place fit for the 21st century for everyone who works here, who visits and who wants to come here. We all want our Parliament and our democracy to thrive, so we should be continuously looking for opportunities to improve it, and I know that

all Members, whether new or old, are constantly doing that. As we look for opportunities here, we must recognise that changes can be made through legislation, and that as we change ourselves, we can also change society to make it more equal.

4.34 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I thank all those who have contributed to a valuable and wide-ranging debate, and especially the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for sharing with us her many ideas, which were clearly built on her experience, in another life before Parliament, of workplace and maternity rights. I also recognise that the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), who is no longer in his place for the very good reasons he gave, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) put their names to the motion. In mentioning my right hon. Friend, perhaps I may take this opportunity to thank her for the work that she does as the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, and say that I particularly look forward to the prospect of working closely with her in the weeks and months ahead.

As I said, we have had a wide-ranging debate. That is part of the nature of the solutions we all look to when we seek to have a Parliament that is fit for the 21st century and to ensure that the heritage, the wisdom of the ages and the things that make this Parliament work extremely well—there are many; we tend not to focus on them and to take them for granted—are preserved while we move forward positively. That came out in the debate.

As I listened to the various contributions, I noted the wide variety of areas on which hon. Members rightly alighted. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge mentioned the onsite nursery, electronic voting, the recess dates, school holidays and parliamentary Prayers. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned commuting to Parliament, retention of MPs and staff, proxy voting, mental health, the parliamentary timetable—especially UQs—disability access, restoration and renewal, women in Parliament and ethnic minority portraits.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead mentioned accessibility and disabled access and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) mentioned job sharing in an intervention. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) referred to shared parental leave, and I was gratified to learn that his eldest daughter shares the name Ophelia with one of my daughters: it is a lovely name. I will certainly take away from this debate the wonderful image of several Labour Members and the shadow Chancellor failing to fill in a passport form at the Passport Office: I am sure there were very good reasons for that happening on that occasion.

This is an important debate. If our Parliament is not properly accessible, does not project an image that gains the trust and respect of the public or is not truly representative of the country at large, it is a pretty poor state of affairs. I accept that more can be done at every turn. On the point about representation, “The Good Parliament” report has been mentioned. It is an excellent piece of work. It gives the figures: at present, just 32% of Members of Parliament are female, and the figure for the House of Lords is just 27%. On just that one metric, that is clearly not right, and much of the debate has understandably been framed in the context of how we address that particular issue, along with several others.

[*Mel Stride*]

I pay tribute to my predecessor, who did some excellent work in several areas that have been raised this afternoon, not least of which is proxy voting. We should not forget that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) was the first to exercise a proxy vote on 29 January. I also thank the Procedure Committee for the valuable work that it did in that respect. My predecessor also drove through work on restoration and renewal, which will bring with it many opportunities to address some of the accessibility and, perhaps, technology issues that have been raised.

One of the aspects that did not feature in everybody's contribution, but is very important and was raised by the shadow Leader of the House, is the independent complaints and grievance scheme, on which much additional work now needs to be done. I look forward to working closely with her on that. My predecessor did a great deal to move that element forward.

As we fall over ourselves to say that things are not right or are archaic, and all the rest of it, we should not overlook the progress that has been made or, indeed, assume that we are stuck in a previous century, because many good things are occurring. There have been changes to the sitting hours, which many Members mentioned. Most recently—this was during my time here—we made a number of helpful changes in 2012. We now have childcare facilities for those aged three months and above, up to five years, the family room off the Lower Waiting Hall, the baby-changing facilities and various other things that are advances in their own right.

A huge amount remains to be done, of course, which I would categorise in at least four areas. The first is a change in the culture of the House of Commons and the Palace of Westminster, particularly through the independent complaints and grievance scheme, which has a role in ensuring that we have a system that has zero tolerance for harassment and bullying in any form. I join the shadow Leader of the House in thanking Julie Harding, the independent director of cultural transformation, for her work, particularly in that regard.

The Alison Stanley report, the six-month review of the scheme, has been mentioned. The scheme has now been going for about a year, and the report has made some interesting recommendations. I look forward to working with the shadow Leader of the House on reviewing those recommendations, particularly on the efficiency of the system, training requirements and resourcing.

There are outstanding matters across the three strands of the Cox report, most notably on the second and third strands. As the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) may have mentioned, we have a debate on the report next Tuesday and I urge all those present to join us. I will have another outing and we will be able to discuss these matters in even more detail—something to look forward to.

The second area is about supporting parents, and many Members specifically mentioned the piloting of proxy voting. We need to see where we go with that. Clearly we could take other avenues. We could broaden the scope of proxy voting to different situations, and I look forward to looking at that closely.

A number of Members commented on the working hours of the House, which the Procedure Committee has previously looked at in detail. There was a survey on these matters in 2017. The problem, as with so many of these issues, is finding consensus. It is for the House to make these changes, and it is for the House to come together and form consensus on any proposal that may be made.

Several points have been made about the organisation of business, and I will briefly touch on one or two of those points. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke raised an interesting idea about the timing of urgent questions, although it contains the nub of the problem with many such ideas. Although it may have some beneficial effects in one respect, it has more negative effects in another. It is about balancing the two. Specifically, if we had urgent questions very early in the parliamentary day, we would still need all the processes that happen in the background leading up to Mr Speaker's decision on whether to grant an urgent question. That would be shifted several hours earlier and would therefore cause problems earlier in the day, although it would perhaps solve some of the problems for others later in the day. We need to debate and consider such things closely, and I would be happy to sit down with my right hon. Friend to have a closer look at her suggestions, if she would like to do that.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge talked about the possibility of deferring Divisions late at night, which is an interesting suggestion, and at least one hon. Member talked about the Whips and the valuable role they play in pairing, slipping and so on. They are often the unsung heroes of the parliamentary processes. I say that as a former Whip and therefore somebody who fully grasps, should I say—to be generous—the impact that they can have upon one's future.

Accessibility is very important. We have a real opportunity with the restoration and renewal project to get some of these things right, and I am very excited about that. The matter was raised by the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead, who made some strong points. As the shadow Leader of the House pointed out, it is not just about lifts, ramps and those kinds of things. Often, it is about the acoustics, lighting, security and technology—all these things that make buildings more accessible.

My final point is about technology in this place. There are great opportunities to use technology better here. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge pointed out that we could speed up voting by holding multiple votes at the same time on iPads, provided the votes were not contingent on each other. We have real opportunities to look at using technology to do things differently, although we have to be careful in considering change in those areas.

To respond to the hon. Member for Livingston, I am not particularly drawn to the idea of electronic voting. There are clearly some benefits, but I am very drawn to the idea of Members getting together at a moment in time when conversations with Ministers and others can occur. That is important, and the second point to underscore is that spending the time to get here and do that means that we have to think more about what we are voting for than we would by, alternatively, clicking something or touching a screen.

To be slightly self-indulgent, I would like to float my own idea, which I first floated in 2011. It went absolutely nowhere, because it was obviously far too frightening and radical, but maybe we have moved on. The idea was to have a list of those about to speak up on the annunciator, so that if we knew that the Leader of the House was going to speak in two or three speakers' time, we could scamper to the Chamber to listen to his pearls of wisdom.

There could be an even greater benefit—I know that I am straying into dangerous, radical territory, Madam Speaker, but let me finish my point at least—because if that information were known several speakers in advance, it could be communicated to the wider world through technology. I could be sitting on a bus and an app could suddenly ping to tell me that the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) would be on her feet in 10 minutes. I would obviously not dismiss that fact for a second, but would press “Yes, please, I’m absolutely gagging to hear from the hon. Lady”, whereupon she would appear on my screen. I could listen to her or perhaps to my local MP on that bus trip and become more engaged with Parliament and my Member of Parliament. Part of the problem is that we do not know when Members will be called to speak, so that might be one idea.

Hannah Bardell: I have to say that I find myself in agreement with the right hon. Gentleman on that point. I am a member of the Council of Europe, and that is exactly how it operates. We know the order of speakers well in advance and exactly how much time we will get to speak—there is none of this increasing or reducing the time limit; it is much more organised. So he will have my support if he brings forward that proposal.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady very much, although I am not sure that I have the support of the Chair—I am desperately trying to hold everybody together, which I might just about be able to manage. If the hon. Lady would like to discuss that further with me, I will be happy to do so, although of course I raise these points fully aware that they are far more complicated than the manner in which I have presented them might suggest.

Perhaps I should conclude and leave a minute or two for the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge to respond to the debate, if she would like to. Again, I thank everybody for their contributions. I have listened extremely carefully to everything that everybody has said and my door is always open. The mission to reform Parliament is deep and complicated, and it often faces considerable resistance from all sorts of different directions, but the House has my commitment that I am happy to work with Members from all parties to see how we can improve matters.

4.49 pm

Ellie Reeves: I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. I said at the outset that no single person has all the answers in respect of the modernisation of Parliament, but this afternoon has been an important opportunity to enable Members to put forward their different views on this important matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) talked about the role of fathers in all this. It is important that we do not forget the role of fathers, who are increasingly, and rightly, now playing much more active roles in their children’s lives. I will benefit from my husband, my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), having two weeks of proxy voting when I have our second child. We did not have that when I had our first. Equally, many colleagues and friends of mine in the world of work are able to take shared parental leave with their partners, but that is not open to us. It is incredibly important to look at the role of fathers.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) summed up perfectly the chaos of Parliament and what it is like here never to know quite what is going to happen during the day. It is a really unusual way to work and is unique to Parliament. We never quite know what is going to happen, what is going to be on the Order Paper and what questions are going to come up. That not only affects those who have caring responsibilities, but can be detrimental to the working lives of MPs and those who support us in our roles. The right hon. Lady has some fantastic ideas about how we can be clearer about our procedures and how they work.

Several interventions related to the role of staff. I hope that, when we talk about this issue in future, we do not lose sight of the fact that hundreds of people work in Parliament supporting the work that we do. We need to be mindful of their needs and their roles.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke talked about the need to have a clear plan and procedure. It is important that we do not go away from this debate and never talk about this subject ever again. The last broad, general debate on making Parliament more family friendly was around three years ago. It is important that we keep up these conversations and do not shy away from the ongoing debate about reform.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered making Parliament a more modern, family friendly and accessible workplace.

University Hospital Coventry

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

4.52 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting me the opportunity to raise this issue, which is very important to my constituents in Coventry South. I am sure it is also important to the constituents of colleagues from Warwickshire.

I thank my colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), and the hon. Members for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey)—for their support. Together, we sent a letter to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to request a meeting to discuss these issues, and I am keenly awaiting a response. Many of those colleagues also attended an informative meeting with two surgeons from the hepato-pancreato-biliary unit at University Hospital Coventry, Mr Khan and Mr Lam. The point of the letter was that we wished to discuss the transfer of the HPB unit, which provides pancreatic services at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire, to hospitals in Birmingham and Worcester.

UHCW has been developing pancreatic cancer services since 1990. It has an excellent team of doctors, specialists, nurses, surgeons and other healthcare professionals, and has completed more than 1,000 major operations and thousands of other therapies. It deploys cutting-edge robotic, endoscopic and radiologic technology to treat patients in Coventry. It takes a patient-centred approach to its service, resulting in excellent feedback from those who have undergone treatment in its care. The success of the department cannot be denied. The outcomes of therapies are on a par with international standards in all spheres. Proposals to shut down this extremely successful department will be a great loss to the NHS.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He is making a very important point. Does he agree that one of the key issues, as he was just alluding to, is that with any potential loss of service comes not just the potential loss of reputation but what haemorrhaging effect it may have on the rest of this great hospital?

Mr Cunningham: Yes, I fully agree with my hon. Friend. That was one of the points made by the surgeons whom I and the hon. Member for Nuneaton met a few weeks ago.

These proposals stem from the 2014 regional review of services. They are based on the fact that the UHCW was not providing care for enough people, according to the requirements of the Department of Health and Social Care and commissioning guidelines. There were serious capacity constraints at University Hospital Birmingham, leading to multiple cancellations of operations on the day and prolonged waiting times. The process of the review was in fact challenged by a legal notice. The initial proposal stated that UHB and UHCW services should be amalgamated, with the teams working together to develop a model that would provide more efficient services in the west midlands and maintain operating at both sites, with the joint service to be led by UHB.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. These are important services that my constituents also access. Clearly, amalgamating these services is of concern to me as it will take away the choice of residents as to whether they want treatment at Coventry or Birmingham. As the population is growing significantly in our area, amalgamating those services may also lead to longer waiting times. Does he agree with me?

Mr Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and I will be touching on that a little later on in my comments.

As a bigger hospital in one of the UK's biggest cities, UHB had a great deal of influence over these discussions. It soon became apparent to the UHCW team that the sacrifices would be one-sided. UHCW felt that it must pull out of the talks, as it was clear that its services would be downgraded and its specialised work would be removed completely—services that it had worked hard to develop. That would be detrimental to the people of Coventry, Warwickshire and beyond.

In November 2018, NHS England served a formal notice on UHCW to transfer specialised liver and pancreas services to UHB in Birmingham or risk decommissioning. UHCW was denied the opportunity to establish the population base required to be an independent centre. There is now a concerted effort from UHB trust management and NHS England to enforce the takeover of the HPB centre at Coventry.

The simple and accepted solution, which is in line with the professional recommendations, is to implement the agreement between UHCW, Worcester Acute Hospitals NHS Trust and Wye Valley NHS Trust to provide the liver and pancreas specialised service at UHCW NHS Trust. It is important to highlight the ongoing capacity constraints at UHB. The realignment from Worcester and Hereford to UHCW would effectively fulfil the required population base to be an independent centre—as per Department of Health and Social Care guidelines—and also reduce the very long waiting times for cancer operations and improve access.

The proposals demonstrate more short-sighted, efficiency-obsessed thinking from NHS England based on the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines. The findings of the 2015 review, which stated that UHCW's HBP unit does not serve enough people, totally ignored the good standard of pancreatic care at UHCW. It is of the highest quality and helps to provide patients with the best possible outcomes. NHS England's proposals threaten the standard of care, which I will raise shortly. The proposals will have a detrimental impact on those in need of this care in Coventry and elsewhere in Warwickshire. Although the 2015 review stated that the HPB unit—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Mr Cunningham: Although the 2015 review stated that the HPB unit did not reach the population requirements, thousands of lives are saved because of the outstanding service that the team at UHCW have developed. The most obvious problem that my constituents in Coventry South, and people in east Warwickshire, will be faced

with is geographical, as the hon. Member for Nuneaton said. Many of them will have to travel about 16 miles for treatment, which will be very costly. They will have to take trains, and we all know the problems associated with that. The time it will take patients who currently use the service to travel to Birmingham is unfair. Patient access will no doubt be reduced, as the journey time, as my colleagues from Coventry will be well aware, is about an hour by car and over 80 minutes by public transport. The journey time for patients who currently use the service at UHCW and live outside Coventry, in rural areas out of the reach of public transport, will be considerably longer and the journey will be considerably more expensive. NHS England will directly increase the stress and physical discomfort that patients and family members will have to endure. In addition, once patients have made the hour-long, or hours-long, journey to UHB, there will be a good chance that their treatment will be cancelled or delayed.

University Hospital Birmingham specialises in liver transplants, and it has a success rate that the whole of the west midlands is immensely proud of. Understandably, those operations take priority because of the speed with which they need to take place. Patients at the hospital who have other, slightly less urgent, conditions find that their operations are routinely cancelled in place of a liver transplant. Moving pancreatic services to Birmingham will dramatically increase the number of patients at risk of having their vital operation cancelled. Any patient who suffers from pancreatic cancer, or people who have a family member who has died from this terrible disease, will know that the speed of detection and the speed of treatment are absolutely vital to survival. It is extremely hard to detect, and, as a result, doctors need to act quickly after a patient has been diagnosed. Any delay to operations decrease the chances of survival even further.

The closure of the HPB unit at UHCW also poses a risk to the overall status of the hospital. By closing a key unit, the hospital is at risk of losing its specialist status, and, as a result, being downgraded to a district hospital. That will have a domino effect on the rest of the hospital.

Matt Western: My hon. Friend is making some very powerful points. For me, one of the most staggering facts—I am sure he will agree—is the sheer scale of the number of such operations that are undertaken at Coventry—5,000 over the past two years, I believe. That does not seem a small figure to me. Does he agree that it is surprising that this is even being considered in the first place?

Mr Cunningham: Of course, I totally agree. As I have outlined, it is not about just the volume of operations but their quality, and the skill of the surgeons, the nurses and all the auxiliary staff who do the best that they can for the patients. UHCW will inevitably lose its most skilled doctors and staff, and see the disintegration of the team, service and leadership that the unit has spent so long building.

Finally, I understand that UHCW has written to NHS England outlining its opposition to these proposals—something that I fully support, as I am sure my colleagues here do. It is concerning that UHCW may face these proposals being forced upon it by NHS England, justified by guidelines that have little thought or respect for the quality of care already being provided and the concerns of local people. Not only do these guidelines ignore the quality of care, but NHS England has shown an incapacity

to implement them fairly and equally across the country. There was a similar case in Stoke, but rather than close the unit, NHS England allowed it to carry on operating as normal, despite not meeting the population requirements. Will the Minister guarantee that NHS England will work with UHCW and support it by allowing it to continue to provide these outstanding services to the people of Coventry and Warwickshire?

5.5 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I thank the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I thank the other Members who have contributed. I want to start this debate, as I try to start all debates in the House when talking about the NHS, by congratulating and thanking the staff who work in the NHS—in particular, given the nature of the debate, the staff who work in the hospitals of Coventry and Warwickshire and throughout the west midlands.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of important points that I will try to address. I know that he wrote the Department a letter in May. I will ensure that there is a response to it, but I can tell him now that the response will be that I would be delighted to meet him and the fellow MPs who have signed the letter to discuss its contents and what I am about to say.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of important concerns regarding the discussions to transfer HPB services from University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust to University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust. HPB services treat patients who have disorders of liver, bile ducts and pancreas, including pancreatic and liver cancer. A large volume of HPB services are delivered in local hospitals, but because of their complex nature and the high cost of care, delivery in conjunction with specialist tertiary centres is often necessary.

As the hon. Gentleman indicated, in October last year, NHS England confirmed that no decision had been made to transfer or close the HPB service in Coventry, despite some concerns that national clinical service specifications were not being met. I understand that he is still concerned about that, but I can confirm that there are currently no plans to transfer HPB cancer services away from University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust. However, NHS England is actively supporting the trust to work alongside University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, to ensure that patients have access to safe, high-quality treatment.

University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust has said that it is proud—rightly so—of the HPB service, which has excellent outcomes and feedback about the quality of healthcare provided, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. In 2015, the West Midlands Clinical Senate reviewed the three HPB services across the west midlands and recommended combining them across two sites, because they did not meet national requirements.

The “Improving Outcomes” guideline document specifies that a population base of at least 2 million is required to make a compliant service. Currently, University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust treats a population of about 1 million. The guidance also specifies that for a population of around 2 million, around 215 pancreatic and liver resections a year would be expected as a proportion of the population size.

[Stephen Hammond]

The hon. Gentleman talked about the number of operations and resections done by this unit. Between 2013 and 2018, an average of 80 resections a year were performed in University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust. He quoted a rather larger figure, but it was 80 pancreas and liver resections a year. I am happy to discuss with him at the meeting the number he quoted, but it is not one I recognise.

I understand that, over the past two years, teams in both trusts have been discussing how to work together with a view to creating a single point of access and shared multidisciplinary teams for HPB in the local area. Both trusts have agreed that the most complex services should be conducted on University Hospitals Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth site. However, the trusts are yet to agree on an established definition of the most complex surgery. The clinicians from both hospitals who are currently delivering the service will continue to work together to develop this new combined model of care. NHS England will determine the best way to meet patients' needs collaboratively, based on specialist surgical skills and the skills that are available at each hospital, as well as on the volume and complexity of clinical cases.

I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, other Members in the Chamber that I recognise that discussions concerning service change are controversial, and this case is no exception. However, I would also like to reassure hon. Members that all service changes are designed to drive up service quality, meeting the specific requirements of local populations and trying to achieve what is best for specialist service users overall. The hon. Gentleman has set out, with great emphasis, the significant challenges that remain, and it is right that the trusts continue to work together to determine the best method to deliver these highly complex services.

The hon. Gentleman and, I hope, all hon. Members know that cancer is a priority for this Government. Survival rates are at a record high. Since 2010, rates of survival from cancer have increased year on year. However, as we know, there is more to do. That is why, last October, the Prime Minister announced a package of measures that will be rolled out across the country with the aim of detecting three quarters of all cancers at an early stage by 2028.

As part of the NHS long-term plan that we announced in January, the Government have outlined how we will achieve the ambition to see 55,000 more people surviving cancer for five years in England each year from 2028. The Department invests £1 billion a year in health research through the National Institute for Health Research. It spent £136 million of that on cancer research in 2017-18, which is an increase of £35 million on 2010-11. The NIHR is funding and supporting a range of research relevant to liver cancer, including a £1.76 million trial of liver resection surgery versus thermal ablation for colorectal cancer that has spread to the liver and early research on specialised magnetic resonance imaging scanning to detect liver cancer that has spread from colorectal cancer. There is much still to be done, but much is being done.

Mr Marcus Jones: I hear clearly what my hon. Friend says about the improvements that are being made in this area and in wider cancer care, but I am still concerned about the potential loss of what is a good service from Coventry. I am also concerned that at the moment,

while no decision has been made, discussions and negotiations are clearly going on in that regard. It is quite obvious from the discussions that the hon. Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and I have had that not everybody in those organisations is in the loop, actually knows what is going on and is satisfied with this situation. Will my hon. Friend look at what more can be done to make sure, in this situation, that information is disseminated widely between clinicians and organisations so that we ensure we do not unnecessarily lose very high-quality people from organisations such as University Hospital Coventry?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend makes an important and valuable point, and as a result of this debate I pledge to write to the hospitals to ensure that the ongoing discussions between the various parties are as inclusive as possible. As I said earlier, I will happily meet him, the hon. Member for Coventry South, and other Members.

Mr Marcus Jones: My hon. Friend is kind and generous in giving way, and I thank him for the commitment he has made. There has clearly been little public engagement, but that is what we need with regard to any changes that are made, so that the public can understand the rationale behind these changes. I am aware of one person who has been chasing information about this issue, but they have hit a brick wall.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is assiduous in representing his constituents and making his points. As I have said, these discussions have not yet concluded, and it would be hugely inappropriate for me or any politician to try to prejudge the right clinical outcomes. When those clinical outcomes have been worked through and the discussions finalised, I have no doubt that University Hospitals Birmingham and the Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership NHS Trust will wish to publicise the result of those discussions as widely as possible.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Following the intervention by the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), the Minister mentioned a wider discussion and involving the public. We met some representatives, including Mr Peter Burns, who is the former chair of the local chamber of commerce and a very influential person. Such organisations, as well as other public bodies, must be brought in and consulted. Will the Minister agree to do that?

Stephen Hammond: It would have been inappropriate for me to be involved in clinical discussions, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. Before we have that meeting, I will write to him on that point. I hope that we will have a meeting relatively soon, so that we can finalise what should be done.

Service change is often controversial. We should rightly scrutinise any service change, but that should be based on patient safety and the right clinical outcomes. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter and continuing to hold us to account, and I look forward to meeting him and other hon. Members to discuss the issue further in the near future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.17 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 June 2019

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

High Streets and Town Centres in 2030

1.30 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Eleventh Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, *High Streets and town centres in 2030*, HC 1010, and the Government response, CP 84.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. It also gives me great pleasure to discuss the report by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on high streets and town centres in 2030. I thank everyone who contributed to our inquiry, including our witnesses. We took a range of evidence from retailers, councils, landlords, planners and academics, and we came to our conclusions after eight evidence sessions and two visits. I thank the Committee staff for their work in putting the report together.

The reason why the Committee decided to conduct this inquiry is, I think, pretty obvious. The decline of the high street is a matter of concern to Members across the House because it is a concern to our constituents and the general public. The change—the reduction in the number of people shopping, in some cases the empty shops, and in the worst cases the decay and deterioration across villages, small towns, larger towns, cities and district centres—is almost entirely down to online shopping.

Some 20% of sales are now done online: the highest percentage anywhere in the world. That has happened in the UK over a fairly short period—the past 10 or 15 years—and in many cases the use of shops and the reaction of councils and the Government have not kept pace with that very rapid change. We as politicians cannot and should not want to halt it, but we must look at what we can do to mitigate its impact and address the situation.

We concluded that the days when the high street was 100% retail—for much of the 20th century, people went to their high streets or town and city centres to shop—have gone, and that there now needs to be a strategy in each area, backed by the local community, initiated by local councils and supported by local traders, to create a different approach to the activities on the high street. We concluded that if high streets and centres are to survive and thrive by 2030, they must become

“activity-based community gathering places”,

with a reduced retail element and a wider range of uses, including green space, leisure, arts and culture, health and social care, and housing, with the community at its heart. Retail will be there, but there will be a number of other activities drawing people in. People will be drawn in by the coffee shops and leisure activities, and then they will go shopping, which will be an important part of a wider experience. That is what we see for the future, and our report looks at ways in which we can get there.

We concluded that local councils have a really important role to play in developing that approach. They need to work with their communities and businesses, and try to create a sense of place for the area, which might be very different from the place next door. On one of our visits, we went to Stockton, which had been badly hit by the loss of retailers. It was putting on bike rides, fun runs, marathons, outdoor theatre and other activities to try to encourage people, particularly in the summer months, to come into Stockton centre and use the retail facilities. We heard about Malton, which is successfully branding itself as a place to go for food. Centres can identify themselves in different ways to show that they are an attractive place for people to come to.

Business improvement districts, where local businesses come in, can play an important part. We were pleased that the Government accepted our recommendation that community representatives should be encouraged to sit on BIDs. BIDs should be about not just business, but community. That is in keeping with our general recommendation to change the whole approach of high streets from simply retail and business to wider community uses.

A key issue from a council perspective was local plans, which should be living mechanisms that are kept up to date. We urged all local authorities to adopt

“living documents, regularly updated to capture and reflect changing trends,”

which

“must be forward looking, anticipating what will happen in five years’ time.”

Local authorities should have dynamic strategies for the high street of the sort we have just talked about. We were pleased that the Government basically accepted that all local plans should be reviewed every five years, and that town and city centre strategies should be looking at least 10 years ahead. They were on the same wavelength.

All I would say to the Government is, go look at the cuts of about 50% that councils have made to their planning budgets. When planning departments prioritise planning applications, they often lack staff with the capacity and capability to think ahead and do the necessary local plan work. There is a concern that councils often have not caught up with the rapid change in online shopping, and therefore their local plans are out of date and do not reflect that change. They are not looking at the changes that they need to make to the land use in their town and city centres.

When we went to Darlington, it was readily accepted that a whole retail area might simply have to be closed down, and that a completely different use might have to be found for that part of the town. It is very simple maths: if 20% of the shopping that was done on the high street 30 years ago is now done online, we need 20% fewer shops. We do not want that to happen in a pepper-potted way, which would simply mean a bit of decay everywhere; we need to concentrate it and change how that land is used in the future.

We recognise that, as part of this process, the Government’s £675 million future high streets fund was helpful. It was there for councils and businesses to tap into and use for this change process. Of course, we do not think it is enough, although the Government do: that is one point of disagreement. We also made the

[Mr Clive Betts]

point that the taskforce that the Government set up—Sir John Timpson came along and talked about it—is a really helpful way forward, but we said that it cannot be a talking shop. It must be a place where councils and others can go and get real, hard advice, and where we can collect examples of good practice. Very often, what is done in one area can be learned from and implemented in another. That is something that we can greatly benefit from.

We identified two additional areas of interest where local government is trying to work with business to change, and where change is needed from central Government. The first is compulsory purchase orders. We learned that where councils try to change land use in an area, they often have to compulsorily purchase some properties. Again, we are pleased with the Government's response. They accepted that and said that they will review the whole process, which is cumbersome, long-winded, time-consuming and costly.

A slightly more difficult area was permitted development rights, for which the Government consulted about extensions at the same time. We said that before the Government further extended permitted development rights, it would be helpful if they carried out an assessment of the impact on the high street of their previous extensions to those rights. The Government did not agree to that, which is disappointing. It is always good to have an impact assessment on what has already happened before doing something else, but we disagreed on that.

We were clear that permitted development rights should not be allowed to get in the way of a local plan that tries to change the fundamental land use of part of a centre. If a local authority is trying to change buildings from retail into housing, leisure or a park, for example, it is not helpful if someone converts the odd shop into a house a few months before that local plan comes into effect. The local authority would then have to say, "Actually, you did that under permitted development rights, but now we have a local plan, which means we need to compulsorily purchase those properties and fundamentally change the land use."

There ought to be a proviso that if a local plan is going to re-designate an area and affect particular properties, it is not helpful to have permitted development rights for the same properties at the same time. The Government need to think carefully about that. At the end of the day, it is not helpful to the individuals to be given that freedom, which is not really a freedom.

The biggest issue on which we disagree with the Government is that of business rates. Every bit of evidence we received showed that there is a problem. I am serving as a guest on the Treasury Committee, which is conducting an inquiry into business rates, and exactly the same sort of evidence is coming forward. Not everyone has the same solution; some want wholesale reform of business rates, while others simply want some changes to make them fairer, but the demand for change was pretty consistent. The reason is that it is considered unfair that Amazon pays 0.7% of its turnover on business rates, and it took quite a bit of extraction to get that figure out of Amazon, while high street chains spend between 1.5% and 6.5% of their turnover on business rates—in other words, more than double, and in some cases it is 10 times as much.

That simply is not fair—this is about the element of fairness. People on the high street are trying to trade at a significant cost disadvantage. Only the Government can alter that. Simply altering business rates will not change the high street back to how it was 20 years ago, but there needs to be a recognition that shopping habits are changing and that taxation policy ought to change in line with that.

We recommended that the Government look at a number of options: an online sales tax, an extension to VAT, a green tax on deliveries, or anything to reflect changing shopping habits. That money could be used to reduce the general business rates paid on the high street, to give a holiday when a business carries out improvements to stop an immediate rise in its business rates, or to add to the Government's fund to help high streets. The Government had all those options—we were not totally prescriptive—but they came back and said no; they did not want to do anything at all.

The Government said that they were bringing in lots of reliefs, which they are, but a point that has been made to us quite strongly is that although the sticking plaster of reliefs is a welcome and useful mechanism, lots of those sticking plasters on top of one another becomes an unsightly and terribly confusing mess. Lots of people said that the system was now really confusing, with a number of reliefs in place. The evidence that I heard at the Treasury Committee evidence session the other day clearly suggested that the need for so many reliefs so frequently indicates that the basic system is flawed and in need of more substantive review.

Interestingly, Sir Amyas Morse, in his retirement swansong before the Committee at our evidence session on local authority finance—he is normally forthright in his views—said:

"I am concerned as to how realistic basing everything on business rates really is...it is concerning as to whether something that is based on a square footage formula in the modern day is going to be terribly relevant to measuring business activity... Even though it may be convenient to go forward with it now, I cannot believe it will endure forever, because it is just such an odd way of trying to measure business activity."

He is right. Business rates are easy, and we are probably not going to tear them up, forget about them and change them tomorrow, because they are relatively easy to collect—that is a great benefit of them—but thinking that all business taxation at local level should rely on square footage is something that goes back historically, because it was an easy thing to do when everybody shopped in a shop. Ministers have to think a bit about the longer term.

Sir Amyas said that the situation will not endure forever. Well, Ministers do not tend to endure forever. Perhaps this Minister has other aspirations but, realistically, at some point a Minister will have to grasp the nettle and consider, if not completely scrapping business rates, then at least recognising that reform has to happen in the light of changing shopping habits. That is the big issue on which we really want to push Ministers, because at some point this is going to change, and we cannot carry on disadvantaging our high street retailers in the meantime.

As I explained, local government has a role here in developing strategies and local plans; central Government have a role in looking at changes to business rates, compulsory purchase powers and other things; and

retailers also have a responsibility. I mentioned that Stockton is doing interesting things, and I asked, “Is bringing all these ventures into Stockton centre really helping?” They said, “Yes, sort of, but when we asked some of our retailers how many more people they got through their shops, they said, ‘Not that many, because we close at 5.30.’” Retailers have to understand that they have to change their approach to suit the customer—that is really important. We heard other examples of retailers, even small ones, using social media to advise their regular customers of changes to products in their store.

Landlords also have to get real. There are still landlords with completely unrealistic retail unit asset values on their books, based on rental values as they were 10 or 15 years ago. Some big retailers are proactive and engaged. They engage in BIDs and look at how they can improve their shopping facilities, while others just see them as a money-making venture. We saw examples of shops lying empty, but there was a long lease, so the landlord was just sitting there and getting the money in, and had no real incentive to go and find another tenant. There have to be changes in that respect.

We asked the Government to review the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, and they say that they will look at whether that should be reviewed. That was a helpful response. However, we also asked the Government at least to consider how they might look again at upward-only rent reviews, and they said, “No, we’re not going to interfere in contracts between landlord and tenant.” We only asked them to look at that. I hope that they might have another think about looking at it, because it was raised with us on a number of occasions.

There are challenges not merely for local government, but for central Government, retailers and landlords. We have said that there are real challenges. We can all see the challenges and problems on our high streets. We were worried and we said in our concluding remarks:

“Unless...urgent action is taken, we fear that further deterioration, loss of visitors and dereliction may lead to some high streets and town centres disappearing altogether.”

Given what has happened over the past 10 or 15 years, and if another 10 or 15 years are spent going in the same direction, we can see that happening.

We cannot predict what lies ahead, but online sales have doubled in the past five years, so it is almost certain that they will grow. The situation will not stand still. People will not reverse their shopping habits but carry on in very much the same direction, which will further undermine retail sales on the high street—it is bound to.

In our report, however, we said that provided that everyone, including the Minister—who is present, while others are not, so we will direct this to her—considers and puts into place our recommendations, high streets and town centres can have a better future. That will require a shift from retail-focused activities to new purposes and uses that foster greater social interaction, community spirit and local identity.

I am pleased to recommend the report. I hope that we can all work together to have it implemented. Many of our recommendations have been accepted by the Minister, but I have pointed out some that have not; I hope she will give us an even more helpful response about those today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the SNP spokesperson at 2.30 pm. Five Back Benchers are indicating that they wish to speak, so the arithmetic is straightforward: there is no need for a time limit.

1.51 pm

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—namely, that I am a director of Stanfords, a travel and cartography business, and, with my sister, a joint owner of a small commercial high street property.

It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of our Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who gave a good synopsis of the inquiry and of the report. I will share a number of the points that he made, but I will try not to duplicate.

This issue affects not just every high street but, by that very fact, every community. Every constituency has areas we can think of that are seriously struggling to cope. High streets face difficulties due to a long-term shift in the way people shop, rising costs and the fact that consumer demand is struggling and changing. That perfect storm of rising costs and weaker demand means that we need to rethink the role and character of our town centres or high streets.

I will focus on three areas. First, town centres are not dead—that is certainly the view of the Government and of our Committee—but an awful lot of them are in intensive care, and some may not make it. We need to free our high streets. Look at the different reasons cited for the problems: restrictive planning arrangements, a heavy burden of taxes and charges, and an unwillingness of some retailers to rethink their business model—as we have heard—and of building owners to reconsider how they collaborate with their near neighbours. Town centres therefore need to change. The requirement, as the report rightly says, is to move towards a broad range of communal activities. Fundamentally, for a town centre to succeed in the future, it must be a place where people want to meet, to shop, sure, and to socialise, to go to a movie, to keep fit, to meet friends or to eat and drink—all those different activities. In different locations, however, the exact priorities will be different depending on local demand.

The concept of a place where people want to meet means that a successful town centre not only has to be able to adapt from where it is now but has to be free in the future to adapt as consumer demand continues to change. It needs to have a public realm that is attractive, welcoming and safe. That is about functional and aesthetic design and about engagement with the community. I totally endorse the point about adapting BIDs, including having community representatives. The other element of the notion of a place where people meet is that access has to be convenient. As Members present understand, beneath that is a whole raft of issues including the location and pricing of parking, alternative means of transport to the town centre, walkability and the interactions of pedestrians, cyclists and so on.

Secondly, on flexibility, the Chair of the Committee rightly pointed out other planning issues, but one of the critical ones is use classes. I understand why in the past

[Mr Mark Prisk]

they were established but, frankly—I say this as a surveyor—they have become too complex and counterproductive. Some argue, “We just need to tinker a little with the use classes, remove some of the sub-categories and everything will be fine.” I strongly disagree. We need to establish a single town centre use, which is consumer-facing and embraces a wide range of activities. I recognise that there might be an argument for food preparation to be a subset, on the grounds of public health, but to my mind, the notion of that town centre use class, which would allow movement of activities, is crucial for town centres to have flexibility.

Alongside that, ensuring that building owners, businesses and local authorities change their mindsets is important to flexibility. That is about the quality of local leadership, which was clear from the evidence to the Committee. Often the distinction between neighbouring towns is the calibre of local leadership. Mark Williams, director of the Hark Group, said:

“Leadership must come from the local authority, for the reasons I have said: it is their town and it should give very clear direction as to what it wants.”

That is true, but with one caveat: the local authority cannot do that on its own; it has to work in partnership. Property owners and other stakeholders need to collaborate. The collaborative nature of forums such as BIDs where everyone involved works together is important. I would like to see BIDs strengthened with new powers, capabilities and membership.

Finally, on digital taxes and online competition, I am disappointed by the Government’s response to the report—although I recognise the hand of the Treasury, probably, rather than of the Ministry. I take the view that we must ensure that all retailers pay comparable tax rates, unlike now. Online retailers have an inherent competitive advantage, as the Chair of the Committee rightly pointed out. Within retailing, we need to shift to a much stronger emphasis on turnover, rather than on fixed property costs.

I have seen several good propositions, such as a simple consolidated tax for smaller businesses or—from Tesco—an online sales levy. A reduction in the business rate would allow such an online sales levy, to ensure that, from the Treasury’s point of view, the revenue is balanced and, from the competition point of view, the online retailer and the bricks-and-mortar retailer are able to compete fairly. There is a good opportunity there. I simply say to the Minister, I hope that we will see more lateral thinking on that.

Finally, in my book, this issue affects every single community. We need to see action, in particular if we are not to see the very heart of many of our communities disappear altogether.

1.58 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome this report, and add my thanks to the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and everyone who contributed to it.

Town centres and high streets matter because they are the hearts of our communities. They are the places where people come together to access goods and services, to meet each other and to enjoy leisure time. People often feel a strong sense of connection to their place and they enjoy local distinctiveness as part of their identity. People enjoy the relationships they have in

their local town centres, with the shopkeepers and café owners who serve them, with the voluntary sector organisations they encounter, and with the public services that they can access in such locations.

Our report found that unlike in the 1990s, when high street decline was linked to the wider economic recession, and the threat of the internet was only beginning to loom on the horizon, the issues facing town centres now are much more fundamental and structural. I will highlight a number of issues covered by the report that are affecting the town centres and high streets in my constituency.

Whether in West Norwood, East Dulwich, Brixton West Dulwich, Dulwich Village, Herne Hill or Crystal Palace, I am proud of the distinctiveness of the town centres and high streets in my constituency, the independent businesses, which serve their communities, and the sense of place and community, which they help to foster. Businesses in my constituency are really suffering. Rents in London are going up, and rents feed into the calculation of business rates. One owner of a hugely popular, much-loved local shop contacted me to say that following the recent revaluation, his rateable value had increased by 110%, and his bill by 34% once transitional relief had been applied. Added to that, he told me that he is being squeezed by increases in employers’ national insurance contributions and his rent. His turnover is substantially down as a direct result of online competition.

In West Norwood next week we will see the closure of the last bank in the town centre, when Barclays shuts its doors for the last time. That is a particular blow in an area with a high number of elderly and disabled residents, and one that will further increase financial exclusion in that part of my constituency and harm the wider town centre. Trade will be driven away as people go to other places for their essential banking transactions and choose to spend their money elsewhere.

The relaxation of permitted development rights is already a disaster, resulting in poor-quality homes in the wrong locations and no affordable housing or contribution to services and facilities. The good examples of office-to-residential conversion generally would have achieved planning consent in any event, so PDR has simply facilitated the delivery of poor-quality homes. For town centres, the Government have proposed further expansion of permitted development rights to enable shops to be converted to residential. That would be an unmitigated disaster for town centres. It is true that in many town centres there is too much retail space, but how and where to reduce that and introduce other uses is a strategic decision that should be taken by the local authority, in consultation with the community. Allowing landlords that freedom runs the risk of gap-toothed high streets up and down the country, rather than the sensible consolidation of a retail heart where it is needed.

Our report is right to identify the critical nature of strong local authority leadership in supporting healthy town centres, but planning departments have been cut to the bone under nine years of austerity. Thriving town centres need a strong vision, effective partnerships between councils, businesses and the community and investment in the public realm, increasingly with a focus on sustainability and climate change at their heart. We need to clean up the air in town centres, deliver safe routes for walking and cycling and create pleasant open spaces resilient to hotter summers and wetter weather.

That simply cannot be done with current resources. Government must invest in and empower local authorities to play the leadership role on behalf of our towns centres that we know can be so effective.

I want to return to the issue of business rates. A fundamental problem for our town centres is that business rates do not reflect the value that people place on their local high street. They penalise town centre retailers in more expensive property, to the benefit of internet-based businesses operating out of low-value warehouses. It is the job of the taxation system to redistribute resources according to the public goods that communities value. Town centres are one such public good. The value of the relationship that an isolated elderly person has with their local shopkeeper does not appear on any balance sheet. Our taxation system must take account of that value and redistribute resources to serve our town centres.

It is for the Government to provide the policy and taxation regime that can support our town centres, whether by creating an obligation for banks to provide branch-based services in every community in the country, redistributing businesses rates to support our town centres or investing in our local authorities to equip and enable them to play a leadership role. The Government are not doing enough; they must show more leadership.

2.4 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, I believe for the first time. As a distinguished former leader of a city council, you will understand the importance of the high street not only to our towns and cities but to people across the country. I apologise to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, for being slightly late for the debate; I was engaged as the secretary of the 1922 committee, administering the ballot for the leadership of the Conservative and Unionist party.

I have a long memory of the high street; when I was a young lad, the shops were open probably five days a week: on Saturday all day, closed on Wednesday lunchtime and often closed on Monday, too. It was the advent of another subject dear to my heart—large-scale immigration to this country—that enabled the Gujarati community and others to come here and see the benefit of cornering the market and opening for longer. That shows how retail outlets have to change with the times. It is no longer good enough to be open from 9 to 5.30 or 6; shops have to be open seven days a week to make money.

I think it is fair to remind the Minister that this report is cross-party and its recommendations are agreed and strongly endorsed by all members of the Select Committee, so they have a lot of strength behind them. I want to touch on one or two things that are appropriate on this issue. First, to rejuvenate our high streets, I agree with the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) about allowing retail properties to be converted to rather unsuitable homes for people. They were originally intended to be retail units and were not built as homes, and often they are unsatisfactory.

However, there are large numbers of flats above high-street shops that were originally made as homes. A lot of those have been converted to become storage units, office space or for other purposes. To rejuvenate our high streets, we need to get people back to living in those properties. In times gone by, the shop owners would live above the premises and have a very short

commute to work. These days, that is not the case. We need, and should encourage, a rejuvenation project to encourage those properties to be brought back into use for living accommodation.

The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned our visit to Darlington and Stockton. It was shock to us that Marks & Spencer—a key store in the middle of the high street—had closed down. We asked why, and were told that it could not make money. It had a 250-year lease on the property, and the property owner quite reasonably said, “Fine. You just keep paying us for 250 years.” No one would take on the lease because it was too expensive, so it blighted the whole high street. The Government need to look at ownership of properties, because without understanding who owns properties and what pressure can be brought on them to change the basis of rent or encourage them to let the properties at a reasonable rate, our high streets will be blighted forevermore.

I was also struck when I had a briefing from Tesco about business rates and their impact on its stores. Tesco, a very successful company across the UK, has concentrated not on the big retail stores but the smaller, Metro-type operations on our high streets. That is welcome because it brings retail back to people at a reasonable price, drives footfall and encourages the development of other comparable retail units on the high street. The slight problem is that its finances on turnover and business rates are remarkably tight. It makes only something like a 4% margin, so if retail sales fall, those stores will be in potential crisis. If they close, many other stores along that high street will close with them, because people will not go to them. There is a fact of life that we must look at: frankly, business rates for retail units are not fit for purpose and need fundamental reform.

The arguments about an online sales tax are reasonable, and I think there are concerns. The first question is whether we can collect the money. Business rates associated with a property are relatively easy to collect. However, an online sales tax should also be reasonably easy to collect. The next issue is where that money goes. If an online sales tax is introduced on warehousing or companies such as Amazon, will it be collected from a central point and then distributed? How will it be provided to local authorities, which will depend on business rates, or some form of business taxation, for their funding?

My answer is that we need an online sales tax, but it needs to be set at a reasonable rate—1%, 2% or whatever—and then distributed on the basis of the business rates income that otherwise would have accrued to a local authority. That is one way we could make this happen. Not reforming business rates is completely unacceptable, because the burden will become greater and greater. The other issue that affects retail units is that, as the Government response to our report shows, the Government have done a whole series of complicated things that, frankly, have distorted the market completely. They have distorted business rates and made them even less fit for purpose, which is why we need fundamental reform and review.

High streets up and down our country have gone through various problems, and many of them are looking a bit tired. They need to be refreshed and reconsidered. We need new ideas, new shops, new facilities and encouragement from local authorities to increase footfall to those premises. We must build up the partnership

[Bob Blackman]

between local authorities and retailers. It is a symbiotic relationship: the reality is that if local authorities do not co-operate with retailers, they will lose business rates income, which will be even more important to them in the future. We look to my hon. Friend the Minister to come up with some wise words and stronger action—particularly on business rates, on which the Government's response was rather disappointing. I hope we see further action from the Government in that area.

2.12 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I, too, welcome the Select Committee's report. I thought it was outstanding, particularly in the light of the challenges that my city experiences on a day-to-day basis, on which I have advocated action in this place. Those who are familiar with our debates on these issues will know that I have made many contributions, particularly about business rates—an issue that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) articulated so well and that I will return to shortly.

York provides an incredible high street experience for people visiting our city, but we also need to make the city work for local residents, who increasingly do not visit the city centre. We should reflect more on the experience of residents and on how communities engage with these issues, because communities can really make a high street. Although our city has 7 million visitors a year, we must give the residents—those who are there day in, day out—the opportunity to have both a real shopping experience and a wider experience. That is why I welcome the report's suggestion that we should look at not just a retail opportunity but a whole community opportunity.

Bishy Road in York was, frankly, a dying high street. The post office had moved out and the street was struggling. However, it has been rejuvenated, to the point of winning a Great British High Street award, because it built its whole centre on the wider community. Traders' engagement with the community means that it is now the go-to place in our city for a retail experience; there are lots of different types of outlets on the street.

However, the picture across the city is not universal. York has many exciting places for people to engage in, which very much attract the external community—I am thinking of Jorvik and the museums in our city centre—but local residents really struggle to be able to afford to benefit from them. Like so many places, York has seen a real hollowing-out of shopping centres, particularly on Coney Street, where shops are struggling, not least because of the huge pressure on business rates.

Before I move on to business rates, let me mention the great opportunities for innovation across our city. The report did not particularly reflect on markets, but they are a great place for businesses to develop and grow. We should look at the role of markets on our high streets, and at how they interact with the wider retail experience. Spark:York, a new development built in shipping containers, has enabled many businesses to start up. It has a real vibe about it and it provides great opportunities. Those kinds of initiatives will help to bring some regeneration. For example, Spark gives good, ethical businesses the opportunity to start up and then move out to benefit from opportunities on the wider high street.

I take slight issue with what the report says about transportation into urban centres. It focuses on car parking. In an age when many of our urban centres are so polluted and congested, we need to ensure that there is really good public transport infrastructure to bring people in. York has one of the best park and ride facilities in the country. Opening up opportunities for living streets, for active travel and for park and ride on public transport is a way of regenerating our urban centres. Of course, if people walk and cycle rather than just going to their cars, there is more engagement; it has been shown that businesses benefit more if people use public transport and active travel. I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

We also need to ensure that there are real community spaces in the heart of our cities. I am thinking about libraries—people used to go to city centres to visit libraries, but they have disappeared—swimming pools and green spaces. We must ensure that people can access community hubs. Because of the lack of facilities and space, and the cost, community hubs are often pushed out to the periphery of the city. If there were go-to places at the heart of the city for residents to congregate and attend events, residents would be drawn into the city again. We need to square that circle to ensure that we have good community spaces in the heart of our city centres.

Business rates have been a particular problem in York. The analysis of what has happened was worked through with Make It York and the York Retail Forum. Across the country, 29% of the high street is owned by international businesses. We might, at one level, argue that that is inward investment, but at the same time it leads to a detached relationship between landlords and local centres. Investors who own property in the city centre often have wider interests, including maintaining their share price and increasing the value of their assets. When an investor charges high rent on a property, that hurts the shop owner, but there is a wider, more important benefit to the investor. Higher rent increases the property's valuation, which pushes up business rates, so people are hit by higher rents and higher business rates.

The false economy, or bubble, that that creates is forcing many of the independents in York, and many other shops, off the high street. We have to address the relationship between property owners and the city or town centre. Social clauses should be built into contracts to force that relationship back to a sensible place. If a property owner does not make the right decisions for the wider area then, frankly, they should not own space on the high street.

We must also look at new developments. In York, we are on the cusp of the exciting York Central development, which has been through many iterations in planning. It was going to be a full retail piece built into the city centre. That is no longer the case, but the plan is still to have retail outlets as part of the 400,000 square metres site. However, if the planning goes ahead, which sees the development in isolation from the rest of the city, there could be a serious detrimental impact on the city itself.

When we look at developing new sites, we need to take into account the broader impact. Sadly, that is not the case for the York Central development, where no appraisal was undertaken to see what its impact could be on the wider city. The plan is on the Secretary of

State's desk. There has been a request for a call-in, which we hope will be honoured to allow the plans to be revisited, not least because of the plan's housing and limited wider economic opportunities.

I welcome the Government's future high streets fund, which is a good start. Like many, I believe that it needs to grow and be dedicated to sharing good practice. York has an interest in benefiting from the fund to ensure that our city works for residents as well as visitors in future. It is also important for those people up and down our country who are working hard to try to make their high street businesses work for everyone's benefit.

2.21 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to be here as the newest member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on the excellent report, which was published before I joined the Committee.

The plight of our high streets is an issue for every MP in the country. Only a few high streets have escaped the pressures on the retail industry that have affected our towns and cities in recent years. Only yesterday came the announcement that Bedford will lose its Topshop and Topman store. We have already lost our Marks & Spencer store, which was in Bedford for more than 100 years. The loss of such stores is a big blow to our town, but the fact is that more of us are shopping online and prefer the convenience of free parking and more choice offered outside the town centre.

I agree with the report's overall realism and its recognition that we will have to be creative and think of ways to transform our high streets, making them attractive as community hubs. I am encouraged to see such an initiative already taking place and blossoming in Bedford. From next week, in collaboration with WH Smith, a Marks & Spencer food offering will be available from the Harpur shopping centre in the town centre. Last weekend 74 independent traders in Bedford joined forces to promote "fiver fest," with offers in each store for £5. Our local business improvement district is investing in promotional activities throughout the year, and the shopping centre, which has had an impressive facelift, now offers a soft play area. Local businesses are fighting back, and it is initiatives like those that give me great hope that our towns will survive.

However, it will be an uphill struggle as long as the Government's austerity agenda continues. Over recent years they have actively created a hostile environment for retail, and I am concerned that several prominent Tory leadership candidates seem determined to disregard all the evidence about the catastrophic impact of a no-deal Brexit on businesses, many of which have no plan for an economic shock.

I share the report's vision for activity-based community gathering places where retail is a smaller part of a wider offering and where green space, leisure, arts and culture, and health and social care services combine with housing to create a space based on social and community interactions. It is important that we remember, however, that not everyone can adapt. Recent changes present a big loss to those who are less mobile. Older customers who do not shop online or have access to out-of-town outlets have suffered. Vulnerable people must not be

forgotten in regeneration plans. We must focus on better, affordable, greener, wheelchair and family-friendly public transport and spaces.

I have pledged my support for the council's bid to the future high street fund, but in reality the fund is insufficient to cover the urgent investment needed for long-term sustainable urban regeneration. I hope that the next Prime Minister understands that investing in our high streets and creating a level playing field for online and urban retail will pay dividends for businesses and communities.

2.25 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for bringing forward the report and for the positive and meaningful contribution that the Committee has made to the overall debate. As several hon. Members have said, this issue affects every constituency, irrespective of where it is. I support many of the report's recommendations and know that if more SNP colleagues were in their places, they would support them, too.

The Government have not accepted all the recommendations in full. I hope the Committee will keep pushing and encouraging them to deliver more, fund more and provide more, especially in leadership, which is critical to future success. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) said that some of our town centres are not dead but may be in intensive care, and they really need that support and leadership if we are to make them viable, vibrant places for the future.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) homed in on business rates, which could be a big driver in how town centres are allowed to develop, as well as how we might start to deal with the closure of banks and post offices, which affect the general feel of our high streets. The Committee's report talked about the impact of business rates on town centre businesses and looked at methods to reduce the burden.

I have a few examples from Scotland—as the Minister will appreciate, I usually do—where for the past 10 years we have run a highly successful business bonus scheme: a package of rates relief now worth £750 million to small businesses. Under the current scheme, small businesses can claim rate relief to the combined rateable value of their business premises up to £35,000 or the rateable value for individual premises if under £18,000. Therefore, many businesses do not pay rates at all, and even those with rates that sit between £15,000 and £18,000 can still qualify for a 25% rate relief. Such support saves businesses up to £7,350 each financial year. As margins in the retail sector are becoming so narrow and squeezed, that is sometimes the difference between shops staying in business and pulling down the shutters.

Under the Scottish Government, 90% of businesses will pay a lower poundage than they would anywhere else in the UK. That all equates to the most generous package of non-domestic business rates relief in the UK. Just as the Committee has suggested, small steps can make a huge difference to the vibrancy of our town centres.

In Scotland, we have also launched a £50 million town centre fund in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to boost high streets and

[Douglas Chapman]

town centres. I note that the Committee recommendations on the UK Government's future high streets fund underline the importance of strong local leadership. There is no better business intelligence available than that obtained from people working on the ground among businesspeople and retailers and the communities in which they operate. It is vital to tap into that knowledge to identify where best to allocate resources that will drive forward growth and help our town centres adapt to modern-day markets. That important point was raised by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who talked about the need for local town centres to adapt and change. He came here hotfoot from the 1922 committee; maybe that should now be called the 2022 committee, if he wants to adapt and change in the future.

Another area that has been important for Scotland has been the growth in regional economies. We have invested heavily in the city growth deals. As I am sure the Minister will recognise, we have not, disappointingly, seen those deals matched by UK Government Departments. The Scottish Government have already committed £388 million more to the growth deals than the UK Government. Although it may not be relevant to this particular report, I say to the Minister that we would like to take these opportunities to up-skill our people and develop our town centres as best we can, but we need to have that funding matched pound for pound by the Westminster Government.

The Committee's report notes the challenging economic environment in which town centres and high streets are operating. Given those challenges, we cannot ignore the impact of Brexit, which I believe will only make things worse. The British Retail Consortium recently warned:

"A no-deal Brexit means the public will face higher prices and less choice on the shelves. British businesses desperately need certainty about the UK's future trading relationship with the EU and will be severely disadvantaged by a no deal."

I do not know whether there will be any change in that respect, given today's Tory leadership election results; we live in hope. The consortium also pointed out that a no-deal outcome in October would disrupt retailers at one of the busiest times of the year, as they stock up for black Friday and Christmas. This week it noted a six-year low for retail footfall in May, due to political uncertainty around Brexit deterring shoppers.

Brexit uncertainty has also had a detrimental effect on workforce availability for many high street businesses, particularly in hospitality, where there is a high reliance on EU nationals for labour. In her response, can the Minister address what action is being taken to protect our town centres from the catastrophic consequences of a no-deal Brexit?

I take this opportunity to share some of the initiatives being pursued in my own constituency. I will link them to the Committee's report as best I can. I pay tribute to Dunfermline Delivers for the outstanding work it has done over the last 10 years, as manager of the Dunfermline business improvement district. The work it does is truly remarkable. I am sure every hon. Member will have examples of how BIDs have been instrumental in improving town centres.

Like most town centres, Dunfermline suffered a serious decline in retail as online shopping became more important but, as the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) suggested, we found it was time to fight back. He

mentioned the 74 businesses that came together to try to improve things, and that it is exactly what happened in our town as well. We had the same empty shops and closure signs around our town centre. Luckily, we had been protected by some bigger retailers, including Marks & Spencer and Debenhams, which decided not to leave the town; we are thankful they made the good business decision to remain. In fact, town centre vacancy rates have actually dropped from 17% in 2014 to 14% in 2018. We would all like to see that trend in all the constituencies represented here today.

I believe that the drop in Dunfermline vacancy rates is in no small part thanks to the efforts of Dunfermline Delivers to maintain footfall in the town. It has been working hard to diversify what the town has to offer. For example, we have one of the biggest fireworks displays in Scotland, attracting 40,000 visitors every year, as well as a popular food and craft weekend.

My personal favourite is the Outwith festival, which is run by Dunfermline Delivers in conjunction with local organisations Avocado Sweet, Firestation Creative and Write Rammy. Now in its third year, the Outwith festival has enjoyed phenomenal success, with over 7,000 attendances across four days in 2018. The festival organises a range of entertainment from music to comedy to dance, and has a real family-friendly feel. Crucially, it brings people into the town centre, where they can take advantage of other retail, historical and cultural offers we can give. With a 98% satisfaction rate among festival goers last year, it is no surprise that the festival will return bigger and better this year. I am glad that the Committee endorses the fact that the issue is not just about retail—there needs to be a full mix of entertainment, a sense of place and places for people to go to enjoy the town centre, so it can allow itself to regenerate.

That is a real success story, as are other BIDs around the country. I encourage the Minister to consider how she can support town centre organisations to recreate that kind of success. I have given examples—I am sure others can as well—and we can learn from each other, to make sure we are all pulling in the same direction.

Dunfermline has also tried to succeed in attracting small, niche businesses to the town centre in recent years; the Happy Earth Place and Little Shop of Heroes are two examples. Last year I visited the Sew Studio, which had recently expanded into a second retail unit on the High Street, diversifying its sewing supplies shop to offer sewing and crafting classes. It is a real hub that helps the town centre feel more vibrant.

The Committee's inquiry pertains to areas that are devolved matters, but I hope Members appreciate the value of comparing approaches in constituent parts of the UK, working towards what is a clearly a common problem. In our support for town centres, we really are all in this together. I have heard some great ideas that I will take back to my constituency. I wish the Committee well in pursuing its recommendations and look forward to hearing a positive way forward from the Minister.

2.37 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank the Committee, its members and its staff for the excellent report. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on securing

this debate and on his opening remarks, which were wide-ranging, informative and comprehensive, as well as excellently delivered. I thank all the hon. Members here for a reasoned debate, delivered in a good atmosphere, considering shared concerns about the future of our high streets at this important time.

This week, Arcadia, one of the biggest retailers in the country, narrowly avoided a collapse, which would have put 18,000 jobs at risk. Even so, Arcadia workers still face 50 shop closures and 1,000 job losses; my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) highlighted some of the impacts of that on his constituency. Arcadia will not be the last retail group to struggle. Too few retail magnates have not given sufficient thought to the long-term sustainability of their retail groups, leaving workers and consumers to pay the price. Mike Ashley is as successful in his self-proclaimed role of saviour of the high street as he was in selling Newcastle United. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has compared working conditions in Sports Direct to “a Victorian workhouse.” That is not the kind of high street we want to see.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) highlighted, the identity of our town centres is wrapped up with the retail sector, which is the largest private sector employer in the UK, employing one in 10 of our workforce. When I walk down Northumberland Street or through Eldon Square in Newcastle and see the vibrant mix of consumers and traders, I am grateful that my city centre appears to be weathering a very difficult trading environment; but that cannot be said for all cities and especially not for our towns.

Indeed, as this report highlights, there are often differences within towns. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke about some of the innovative practices that some businesses on her high street were using to attract more foot flow. In Newcastle, Grainger market, our Victorian gem, is putting on tea parties and gastronomic delights in order to do the same thing.

What this review tells us is that, if our town centres are to survive to 2030, they must be grounded in community. Local authorities have a responsibility for the economic and social wellbeing of the places and communities they serve, but the scale of the issue demands action from central Government to ensure that our local authorities have the necessary powers to do their job, as hon. Members on both sides have emphasised. That must be backed by proper funding—much, much more than the pitiful £1.2 million put into the regeneration pilot in 2017. Our high streets and town centres anchor our local economies and offer jobs, services and a sense of place, but that is declining year on year. Every retail location type—high streets, retail parks, shopping centres—saw the number of occupied units decline at a faster rate in 2018 than in 2017. The high street vacancy rate rose from 11.2% to 11.5%; in retail parks it jumped from 4.9% in 2017 to 7.1% in 2018. There are 50,000 empty shops in the UK. In shopping centres, 6% of empty space has been empty for two years. On the high street, that figure is 5%. There have also been more than 100,000 job losses in retail over the past three years alone.

Some people say it is inevitable that online shopping will kill the high street, but it is wrong to think that the rise in internet retail equals empty shops and job losses.

The impact of technology on our society involves political choices, and in this case the impact is due to Government inaction. As we see in this report, many shoppers still enjoy shopping as an experience; the most successful high streets are those with a good mix of retail, leisure and services, which provide a vibrant community space, not just a collection of businesses.

Under this Government, we have seen chronic under-investment in infrastructure, particularly outside London and the south-east. For example, the north-east receives less than one third of London's transport spending per capita. According to the Local Government Association, outside London we have lost 117 million miles of bus routes—nearly half of all council-subsidised services—since Tory austerity began in 2011.

Every month, 60 bank branches and 250 free cash machines close, with devastating effects on access to cash in rural areas, and despite repeated promises to safeguard our post offices, we face 2,500 potential closures over the next year. We welcome today's announcement by UK Finance that the banking sector will work to support people's free access to cash, but it is not enough. Will the Minister take note, follow Labour's lead and ban automated teller machine charges?

This Government have not only failed to take action but repeatedly ignored their own warnings. Despite the recommendations of this report, they have chosen to extend permitted development rules, which, as we have heard from many hon. Members, can effectively depopulate town centres in the day, which has an impact on retail and restaurants and makes it harder to enforce high standards for new homes. Will the Minister take note and suspend any further extension of permitted development, as hon. Members have called for?

In their response to this report, the Government refuse to recognise that online retailers should be contributing more. The system is past its sell-by date, having been

“designed in 1990, when businesses made money in a very different way.”

Those are not my words, but those of the Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, who understands that high street retailers are being crippled by an outdated business rates system and has called for online retailers to pay more tax—as indeed have hon. Members such as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) today.

The Tories have failed our high streets, failed our retail sector, and failed our economy. They have no claim to be the party of business. As the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) highlighted, a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic for businesses, extending that failure and wrecking many of the businesses on our high streets and in the retail sector. I ask the Minister to rule out a no-deal Brexit—*[Interruption.]* I am sure it is within her pay grade to do that. Will she at least say that she will not support a Conservative candidate who supports a no-deal Brexit?

Labour's industrial strategy will rebuild our economy for the many. Unlike this Government, we care about every part of the economy. As part of our “innovation nation” mission, we will raise productivity and job quality in sectors such as construction, agriculture and retail that have been wholly neglected by the Government's industrial strategy. Labour would fund a new catapult

[*Chi Onwurah*]

centre to boost the take-up of innovation in the retail sector, creating higher wages and better jobs on high streets across the country.

Our high streets are reaching crisis point, which is why Labour has an emergency five-point plan to resurrect and rebuild our town centres. I will finish with that plan. First, we will ban ATM charges and stop post office and bank branch closures. Secondly, we will provide free bus travel for under-25s. Thirdly, we will roll out free public wi-fi in town centres, so that we have networked centres that encourage people to spend their time as well as their money. Fourthly, we will establish a register of landlords of empty shops in each local authority, making it easier to bring shops back into use. Finally, we will introduce an annual revaluation of business rates, ensure a fairer appeals system and review the business rates system to bring it into the 21st century.

Labour's plan will revive and reinvigorate our high streets, which must urgently adapt. We will take the urgent action required; will the Government follow in our plan and commit real resources to ensuring that our town centres can survive and thrive?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I will say two things. First, my notes said that the Minister was Kit Malthouse, but you are no less welcome for being unexpected, Minister. Secondly, can I ask you to leave a short space of time at the end of your speech for the Chair of the Committee to wind up?

2.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Absolutely, Mr Stringer. I am Heather Wheeler, just in case anyone had not worked that out. The other Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), should have been responding, but sadly he is at a funeral today. It is therefore my pleasure to respond to the debate. Clearly, my 16-minute speech is going to go nowhere, as I am leaving time for the Committee's Chair to reply. As always, Mr Stringer, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I thank all members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee who are present for their cross-party report into high streets and town centres for working with the Government to support the sustainable transformation of our high streets. We are pleased that the report broadly recognises the Government's measures to instigate structural change, and we agree with the diagnosis that local places are best placed to know what their local solutions are—with appropriate support from central Government. It is a helpful report and, as has been said, we have broadly accepted its recommendations. Although I cannot cover everything in the short time available, I hope that hon. Members present will see how the Government are pursuing a holistic package of measures to transform our high streets and town centres for the long term.

Last year was particularly challenging for UK retailers, bringing into question traditional success models for towns and high streets. Quick to respond, in July 2018

the Government commissioned an expert panel, bringing together a wealth of expertise from the retail, property and design sectors. Chaired by Sir John Timpson, it explored the question that brings us here today: how do we catalyse change and ensure that town centres across the country adapt and thrive for future generations?

Our package includes a £675 million future high streets fund to support local areas in England to invest in town centre infrastructure, to make a real difference to the underlying structure of the high street. This demonstrates our commitment to taking long-term action to help high streets and town centres evolve through investment to improve town centres. We thank the Committee for commending our work in this area and echo its sentiments. We are currently considering more than 300 expressions of interest, and we have placed significant weighting on local leadership, vision and strategic ambition when assessing the bids. The places progressing to the second stage of the fund and receiving revenue funding to support the development of their plans will be announced later this summer.

As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, business rates are a bone of contention. Since the 2016 Budget, we have introduced a range of business rates measures in England worth more than £13 billion over the next five years. This includes the announcement in the 2018 Budget to take a third off eligible retailers' bills for two years from April 2019, which is worth an estimated £1 billion alone. We have also doubled small business rate relief from 50% to 100% for eligible businesses, resulting in more than 655,000 small businesses—one third of occupiers—paying no business rates at all.

Alongside that we have committed to a £435 million package to support ratepayers facing the steepest increases following the 2017 revaluation. Finally, we switched the annual indexation of business rates from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index, representing a cut in business rates every year for all ratepayers. That alone will save all businesses almost £6 billion over the next five years.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: It will have to be very quick.

Rachael Maskell: I will be brief. Will the Minister commit to going back and scoping out the possibility of a turnover tax?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady is obviously prescient. When the Government concluded the last fundamental review of business rates, we decided to keep business rates as a property tax, following stakeholder responses. Respondents agreed that business rates are easy to collect, difficult to avoid, relatively stable and clearly linked with local authority spending. Some respondents suggested alternative tax bases. However, Select Committee members and others may wish to know that there was no consensus on an alternative base, and that even those respondents who put forward alternatives were clear that they were not without issues. To finish on business rates, the Government are committed to listening to views and will keep all taxes under review.

Helen Hayes: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Wheeler: I have not got time.

Helen Hayes: I will be extremely brief. This issue is killing businesses across the country now. I am afraid that saying the Government generally keep it under review, along with all other taxes, simply does not cut it for businesses in our town centres.

Mrs Wheeler: I have outlined how the Government are helping local businesses with many, many millions of pounds, and with £6 billion-worth of relief, so I think the hon. Lady is slightly over-egging it.

Another issue that has been highlighted is our undertaking a planning consultation on permitted development rights to help support change on the high street. Permitted development rights continue to play an important role in the planning system, supporting key Government agendas such as housing and high streets by providing more planning certainty while allowing for local consideration of key planning matters.

To put the hon. Member for Sheffield South East's mind at rest on local plans and permitted development rights, where a local planning authority considers it necessary to protect a local amenity or the wellbeing of an area, it can consult the local community by removing a right by making an article 4 direction. Proposals for development can change, and a change of use would require a planning permission application.

Equally, on the point from the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) about poor quality homes being delivered through permitted development rights, permitted development rights have actually provided 46,000 really important homes that needed to be built. However, we are particularly keen to ensure that the quality of all new homes meets our ambitions, so in the spring statement we announced a review of permitted development rights for the conversion of buildings to residential properties, in respect of the quality and standard of homes.

Because the Government believe in the high street, we run the Great British High Street awards, with Visa, to celebrate the achievements of our communities and high streets. The awards are a great way of bringing together local players and focusing minds on high streets. In entering the awards, local authorities, businesses and communities work together and get local people talking about their high street, letting local leadership emerge. Last month, I was delighted to launch the 2019 competition in Crickhowell, the town that took the top prize in 2018. I am sure that Committee members will join me in wishing this year's entrants the best of luck.

We encourage all those with an interest in high streets, particularly landlords and retailers, to consider how they can take the Committee's recommendations on board in their own decision-making processes. We agree wholeheartedly with the Committee that the elements raised today form part of a bigger whole.

This is a package of interconnected measures to help local areas make their high streets and town centres fit for the future. The different elements will work together to have a real impact on high streets and town centres in adapting and evolving and in becoming vibrant hubs once again. I believe that the benefits of this will be felt more widely, helping to deliver local growth and real

change in our communities. This growth will be shaped by the Government's industrial strategy, which sets out the long-term plan to boost productivity by backing businesses to create good jobs and will increase the earning power of people throughout the UK with investment in skills, infrastructure and places. I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Sheffield South East on securing the debate, and I thank hon. Members for their speeches and questions and the Committee for its helpful recommendations.

My local high street in Swadlincote is thriving, my wonderful South Derbyshire District Council has no car parking charges in any of its council car parks, and we moved the market back down the high street, making it a vibrant place to be. I am sure that, as the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) said, we all have marvellous examples that show how our high streets can get back to being the best places that they can be. The challenge of rebalancing the functions of our high streets and town centres is a real priority for us across the nation. Having adapted successfully before to new demands, we believe that places can and will do so again.

2.58 pm

Mr Betts: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and particularly members of the Select Committee, whom I also thank for agreeing this report unanimously. We did very well: it was 45 minutes before Brexit was mentioned and 70 minutes before Mike Ashley was mentioned.

We started off with failures of retail, whether British Home Stores, which is gone, or House of Fraser, which is restructuring, and we subsequently heard about Arcadia, Marks & Spencer and Debenhams closing stores and small businesses going out of business altogether. We looked at a situation that could get worse, with some high streets failing completely, but then we looked at the possibilities for the future. We recommend that all stakeholders get together, including local councils, Government, retailers and landlords. We can have a brighter future by changing the nature of the high street, with changing uses—coffee shops, leisure, open spaces, public services and residential—all being brought in, led by the local authorities with BIDs through their local planning processes, involving their local communities and businesses in a package.

We also said that there has to be a level playing field for retail, which will still be an important part of the high street. We held our inquiry after all the Government's initiatives on business rates had been brought in, and no one who gave evidence said that they were sufficient. That is the reality. The Government simply have to go away and look again at the possibility of alternatives, such as an online sales tax. They should read the excellent report from Tesco that said how this could be done and how it could benefit the high street.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved

That this House has considered the Eleventh Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, High Streets and town centres in 2030, HC 1010, and the Government response, CP 84.

Jewish Community: Contribution to the UK

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of the Jewish Community to the UK.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir David. I originally sought this debate following a conversation with my friend Marc Levy of the Jewish Leadership Council, and let me say at the outset what an excellent ambassador he is for the Jewish community. When we first discussed the idea, I was not keen on it; I did not see its relevance because when I look at people, it would not necessarily occur to me whether they were Jewish or not.

Let me give some examples, using my colleagues. I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) is in her place. I know that she is Jewish, but when I think of her, I think of a woman who has been a friend of mine for 20 years, of somebody who is a trade unionist and primarily of somebody who has made a real contribution to and developed a real expertise in defence policy.

I knew that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) was Jewish, but I think of her first as somebody who gave real leadership in local government for many years before she came here and gave leadership in the Select Committee on Transport. Whether she was Jewish or not was not a factor for me.

Let me mention some other colleagues. I was not even aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) were Jewish until they started to receive antisemitic abuse. I was not aware, nor would it even have crossed my radar; I would not even have considered it. However, I would have considered my hon. Friend's work on environmentalism and my right hon. Friend's service not only as a Minister for many years, but as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

As Marc explained to me, there is a feeling among Jewish groups that too many headlines recently have been negative. Jewish groups understandably feel under threat, be it from a rising right-wing, nationalist and racist populism in eastern Europe, from President Putin talking about Jews controlling the world banking system, from President Trump's failure to denounce protestors in the USA chanting, "Jews will not replace us," or—let us be clear—from a sense and fears that my own party has elements that have expressed antisemitic remarks or statements and that complaints about those have not been dealt with sufficiently quickly or robustly.

However, instead of all the negative stories about Jewish people—negativity, I hasten to add, that they themselves are not responsible for—it was time to have a celebration of the contribution of the Jewish people and Jewish groups to our society; to reset the dial to the positive; to shine the spotlight on the positive news stories about things that go on every day but get squeezed out by the more unpleasant stuff; and to remind ourselves

again not just of the quality or even the quantity of the Jewish contribution to the UK, but of the length of that contribution.

Obviously, I am not Jewish myself—I doubt there are many Jews whose first name is Christian. In fact, growing up in a Cheshire village, I had never knowingly met any Jewish people until I went to secondary school in Manchester, which has one of the largest Jewish populations outside London. I recall that at that school we had the Sieff theatre, named after Israel Sieff, a former chairman of Marks & Spencer, and paid for by his family. That was the first example of Jewish philanthropy that I had come across.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the speech that he is making. He has mentioned the Jewish community in Manchester, so would he like to take the opportunity, with me, to celebrate the interfaith work of the Muslim Jewish Forum of Greater Manchester?

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If she will permit me, I will return to that issue shortly.

The UK has a long-established Jewish community: the first record of Jewish settlement dates from 1070. There was a continual Jewish presence in the country until King Edward's Edict of Expulsion, dated 1290. Sadly, therefore, we can also date UK antisemitism from around that period. Following the expulsion, there was no Jewish community apart from those who practised secretly.

Towards the middle of the 17th century, a considerable number of Marrano merchants settled in London and formed a secret congregation. That was until the time of Oliver Cromwell, who never officially re-admitted the Jewish community. However, a small colony was identified in 1656 and allowed to remain. In 1701, Bevis Marks Synagogue opened in London. It is the oldest continually used synagogue in London. The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the main Jewish representative body, was established in 1760.

In 1837, Queen Victoria knighted Moses Haim Montefiore. Four years later, Isaac Lyon Goldsmid was made a baronet; he was the first Jew to receive a hereditary title. The first Jewish Lord Mayor of London, Sir David Salomons, was elected in 1855. That was followed by the 1858 emancipation of the Jews. On 26 July 1858, Lionel de Rothschild was finally allowed to sit in the British House of Commons when the law restricting the oath of office to Christians was changed.

Owing to the lack of anti-Jewish violence in Britain in the 19th century, it acquired a reputation for religious tolerance and attracted significant immigration from eastern Europe. Of the eastern European Jewish emigrants, 1.9 million headed to the United States and about 140,000 to Britain. Some growing antisemitism during the 1930s was counterbalanced by strong support for British Jews in their local communities, leading to events such as the battle of Cable Street, where antisemitism was strongly resisted by Jews and their neighbours. They fought it out as a united community on the street against fascist elements.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Christian Matheson: I will always give way to my hon. Friend.

Ruth Smeeth: As my hon. Friend is touching on the battle of Cable Street, I feel that I should put on the record my pride that my grandmother spent the 48 hours in the run-up to the battle of Cable Street—she lived in the east end of London—putting razor blades into tomatoes to throw at Nazis. I take a great deal of pleasure in being able to contribute to such an important debate, because the Jewish contribution to British life has had many different forms.

Christian Matheson: That contribution has had many different and, dare I say it, honourable forms when it comes to dealing with Nazis. I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention.

As we recall the 75th anniversary of D-day and the battle of Normandy, let us remember the more than 60,000 Jews who served in the British armed forces during the second world war; they included 14,000 in the Royal Air Force and 15,000 in the Royal Navy. Some 30,000 Jews from Palestine also served in the British military. Five Jewish soldiers have won the Victoria Cross. Some 4,000 took part in the D-day landings.

Today, there are about 290,000 Jewish people in the UK across all walks of life. According to the 2011 census, British Jewry is overwhelmingly English, with only about 5,900 Jews in Scotland, 2,100 in Wales and fewer than 200 in Northern Ireland. There are just 90 or so in my constituency. I am always pleased to tell the House that that equates roughly to the size of my majority when I was first elected, in 2015, leading some of my Jewish constituents to claim, misquoting *The Sun*, “It was the Jews wot won it.”

The majority of Jews in England and the UK live in and around London, with almost 160,000 in London alone and a further 21,000 in Hertfordshire. As hon. Members have heard, the next most significant population is in Greater Manchester; it is a community of slightly more than 25,000.

I am particularly proud of the role that Jews played in the growth of the trade union movement and the founding of the Labour party. The Jewish community was instrumental in setting up trade unions. The “Jewish Encyclopedia” of 1906 lists 39 Jewish unions set up between 1882 and 1902. The London Jewish Bakers’ Union was created in 1905 as the International Bakers’ Union—members came from Germany, Poland, Russia and elsewhere—and continued until 1970; it was the longest lived Jewish union. Poale Zion was the forerunner of today’s Jewish Labour Movement and was one of the early affiliates to my party in its nascent years.

The Jewish community is also loyal, despite what racists may claim. Every week at the synagogue, on the Sabbath, a prayer is said for the Queen. It begins:

“Our Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth, Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, Charles, Prince of Wales, and all the Royal Family. May the supreme King of kings in His mercy preserve the Queen in life, guard her and deliver her from all trouble and sorrow. May He bless and protect Her Majesty’s Armed Forces.”

As much as I used to enjoy going to the all-night Jewish bagel bakery in Brick Lane in London when I was a student years ago, it is worth recording that our national dish—fish and chips—is probably a Jewish import. It is thought that fried fish was first introduced

into Britain by Jewish refugees from Portugal and Spain in the 16th century. The first fish and chip shop was opened by a Jewish immigrant, Joseph Malin, in Cleveland Street in London.

I wish to focus on two areas of Jewish life today: first, the contribution to and delivery of social policy. Reform Judaism has led policy development work on loneliness and isolation. It launched the programme with a conference in March 2018. Reform Judaism holds quarterly networking meetings with volunteers and staff to share ideas and best practice and to hear about innovative projects and practices in other communities and beyond. Inclusion and wellbeing are considered on all events, and Reform Judaism’s forthcoming conference will focus on mental health and wellbeing.

Reform communities deliver their own programmes and activities, which include many opportunities to combat loneliness and isolation. Most communities offer befriending schemes, welcoming new members and visitors to synagogue and buddying for people who might need support to join activities or services. Communities phone members at significant points of the year—Jewish holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, or at times of bereavement—and use that as a chance to foster links and bring people who might be lonely into the community.

Some communities are also able to offer transport, which can be a significant factor in social isolation. Lunch clubs, dementia cafés, afternoon teas, bereavement support groups and Jewish festivals are opportunities to bring people together and foster social links. Communities have intergenerational projects such as singing with toddlers and the elderly or teams teaching older people how to use technology. Such projects are across the UK at many Reform synagogues.

The Jewish Leadership Council has promoted social care activities undertaken by ex-members who work with the most vulnerable in society and create an environment in which the elderly in the Jewish community can live independently where appropriate.

Ruth Smeeth: Many different forms of support are given to the elderly within the Jewish community, primarily provided by Jewish Care, among others. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the day centre in Hendon, which focuses on holocaust survivors in their final days, is a wonderful addition that would not be provided by the state? That shows the value of organisations such as Jewish Care.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. There is a strong culture of supporting the family and others within the Jewish community, but anything that helps to support holocaust survivors and also reminds us of what they and their families went through, so that we can remind future generations, is very important.

Over the past 12 months, the JLC has undertaken an elderly care review to look into all its social care organisations so that they can work with the elderly and see how, strategically as a community, they can create a cohesive and effective link between organisations and best enable them to be effective in their aims and missions.

Mitzvah Day is a body that promotes an inclusive day of social action. Its aim is to bring people together through Jewish-led social action, and its work contributes

[*Christian Matheson*]

in various ways. Volunteering itself is a powerful way for people who are isolated or disconnected from others to come together. Taking part in Mitzvah Day is an easy and accessible way to join a group of volunteers to support local community projects and needs. It not only allows for volunteers to feel connected and useful, but for the beneficiaries to connect to local community volunteers and to establish friendships. Mitzvah Day has demonstrated a substantial repeat effect, with volunteers returning year on year to run Mitzvah Day projects, and with volunteers continuing to volunteer throughout the year.

The second area that I wish to look at—my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) touched on this—is community cohesion. I wish to refer specifically to the work of the Community Security Trust, which was set up to protect Jewish communities and Jewish groups from violence, attacks, intimidation and worse. The CST has spread out to use its expertise, developed over two decades, to support other community groups, including Muslim community groups who also face hatred, violence and threats.

CST co-runs several initiatives that encourage and improve community integration, including Stand Up! Education Against Discrimination, which aims to empower young people in mainstream schools to learn about and act against discrimination, racism, antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, while developing their social responsibility in the community. The project is led by Streetwise, a partnership between CST and Maccabi GB, another membership organisation, and is supported by Tell MAMA, Kick It Out and Galop. Given a 29% rise in the number of hate crimes in 2017 in the UK, including anti-Muslim hate and antisemitism, the interactive free-of-charge workshops aim to educate young people about tolerance and social responsibility, giving them skills to counter discrimination while ensuring their personal safety.

Framed within a broad conversation about the Equality Act 2010 and British values, Stand Up! currently employs two facilitators from Jewish and Muslim backgrounds, modelling a partnership of interfaith collaboration and demonstrating how groups that are often perceived as oppositional can work together successfully. The workshop combines Streetwise's and Maccabi GB's experience in delivering informal personal development sessions to tens of thousands of young people in schools nationwide with expertise in monitoring and recording antisemitic, anti-Muslim, racist, and LGBT+ hate incidents of the other partner organisations: the CST, Tell MAMA, Kick It Out and Galop. The Stand Up! project launched in January 2017 and has since gone from strength to strength, delivering sessions to more than 8,000 young people, and booking sessions in 48 schools and settings to date.

The Jewish community has a great story to tell.

Kate Green: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Christian Matheson: I will.

Kate Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I sense he is moving on towards the end of his speech, but, before he does, I want to ask him to commend another

interfaith initiative, Nisa-Nashim, which brings together Jewish and Muslim women across the country in social action, mutual learning and sharing of enjoyable leisure activities. I am sure he will agree that that repeats the message of the strength of the partnerships that the Jewish community forms with those of other faiths, and of no faith.

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We could be here all afternoon simply listing the different organisations and schemes that Jewish community groups run either on their own or with other community groups. Many of them slip under the radar, but none of them fails to have an impact.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and also for his excellent opening speech. If it had one fault, it was that it did not mention Newcastle, which I shall now do. I grew up in Newcastle, and, like him, I did so not understanding enough about the contribution of the Jewish community to a great city.

I was surprised and encouraged when I learned about of the contribution of Herbert Loeb, who, like me, was an electrical engineer. He came to Newcastle at the age of 16 in 1940 and built some of our great high-tech businesses, which still make a contribution to our economy today. Newcastle might have a small Jewish community, but it makes a brilliant and strong economic contribution to our city now, just as it did in the past.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding us that the contributions of members of the Jewish community can be found everywhere and in every walk of life.

The Jewish community has a great story to tell. Far from being insular, it is integrated, as we have just heard, and is integral to our society. Its members are generous with time, spirit and philanthropic giving, but once again the Jewish community feels under threat. It seems that as soon as there is the first sign of society's cohesion breaking down, antisemitism returns and is one of the first signs of that breakdown. We must deal with that racism head on, but we must also deal with it by remembering and welcoming the Jewish community's massive, positive contribution, individually and through collective groups. I, for one, am grateful for their contribution to our nation.

3.19 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in the debate under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson)—my friend and colleague—for calling the debate, and for his incredible speech, which outlined the contribution of my family and community.

It has been an interesting experience being a Jewish parliamentarian over the past three years, but I am reminded on a daily basis of the contribution that my family have made. I rarely get to say nice things about being Jewish in the United Kingdom, and typically have to say more horrible things, so perhaps the House will indulge me slightly as I tell my family story, and how we ended up here. Much of it was referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester.

I am the great-granddaughter of Jewish immigrants who arrived here from Russia and Poland, fleeing pogroms. They had fled persecution, but arrived as economic migrants in the east end of London—among the more than 140,000 that my hon. Friend mentioned. My great-grandfather started a Yiddish-speaking Jewish trade union branch, which is now part of Unite the union. They had a wonderful daughter, who became my grandmother. She desperately wanted my mother and me never to know anything she got up to as a young woman and political activist, because she did not want to give us ideas.

Christian Matheson: That worked out well.

Ruth Smeeth: It did not work out well for her or anybody.

I learned much of this history only recently, because of events that have happened. Not only was my grandmother at the battle of Cable Street, including helping with preparations for it, but she taught me my first political song. When she was eight she participated in her first political campaign, going around the streets of the east end of London campaigning for Harry Gosling: “Vote, vote, vote for Harry Gosling.” At that point the Jewish community could not afford leaflets. No community could afford them. It was all done by children singing to get the vote out on polling day. It sounds much more appealing than my get-out-the-vote operation at a general election.

My grandmother was definitely a visionary, and ahead of her time. In 1936, as well as participating in Cable Street, she took food and socks and went to meet the Jarrow marchers when they arrived in London at the end of their march. That is not something necessarily to be expected of an immigrant Jewish woman living in poverty in central London. She was definitely our matriarch and instilled in our family everything that has led me here today. When my mother was a single mum, working full time, my grandmother was my carer. On a Wednesday afternoon all the little old ladies on her council estate in the east end of London would arrive at her flat, and she would feed everyone tea. She could read and write so well that they all arrived with their letters and she did what I would now call casework for them. She was extraordinary, and because of her my mother became the boss of my hon. Friends the Member for City of Chester and for York Central (Rachael Maskell); she became a trade union deputy general secretary. I feel that between the two of them I am very much in a family.

Our story, beyond the fact that, like many in this place I am a third-generation immigrant, could be told by many different people across my community, but it gave me my values. The extraordinary women in my family participated in the history that my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester talked about. They definitely cooked a great deal, but they got me here. Many in my family also served. My great uncle Bozzy died on D-day. My grandfather fought at Monte Cassino. We are British to our core, and have never been anything other than British until recent days when being Jewish became a secondary factor. I am grateful, as are my family, that we ended up here and not in America by accident. I am grateful for everything that this country has done, and every opportunity that has been afforded to my family and all the others who arrived.

There is someone else I want to mention. I am not the first Jewish Member of Parliament for my great city. Barnett Stross was the first Jewish Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester touched on the subject of Jewish philanthropy, and it was because of Barnett Stross that we helped to rebuild Lidice after the war. My city of miners helped to rebuild another city of miners. The Jewish community has made contributions to our country at every level, whether political or community, as has every other faith and immigrant community here. We are not special. We are just part of a wonderful society that I am grateful to represent in this place.

3.25 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): There appears to be a little time, Sir David, and I am grateful to be able to make a short contribution. I particularly want to speak about the work of World Jewish Relief, because I spend quite a lot of time in Parliament looking at policy on, and support for, refugees and refugee projects. I commend the work of World Jewish Relief for refugees arriving in this country.

Many of us have learned a great deal about the importance of refugee welcome by listening to the stories of refugees from appalling attacks and persecution and, ultimately, the holocaust—still remembered by my parents’ generation. We have learned particularly poignantly from colleagues such as my noble Friend Lord Dubs, who has talked about his experience as a child refugee. That has enormously enriched the debates that we have today about the plight of modern refugees fleeing to our country. My interest in refugee policy is at the practical end; about what can be done to support people arriving here. World Jewish Relief offers an exemplary programme, to which I should like to draw the House’s attention.

The programme recognises that refugees are desperate to integrate and make their homes in the country that welcomes them: to become part of their community—their friends and neighbours. We all know that one of the most important places where we can integrate and become part of a community, and feel that we are playing our part as community members, is the workplace. That is why I want to draw the House’s attention in particular to World Jewish Relief projects to support refugees into employment. It is not easy for a refugee to move into employment. Although many arrive here highly skilled and qualified, the persecution and trauma that they have experienced may make their re-entry to employment difficult. They might have to learn a new language and requalify in a new system of professional qualifications or skills recognition. Of course, they also have to overcome and deal with the trauma that brought them to this country.

World Jewish Relief helps with all that. It helps people to learn English, if they need to, and to reskill. It helps them to obtain the necessary recognition of their qualifications and it helps to reintroduce them to the workplace. It recognises that different individuals will be at a different place on the journey and that, for some, a return to work in any foreseeable future is probably unimaginable; but it does not drop them. It continues to offer them support, care and encouragement. To date 250 refugees have been helped into employment. Sixty-six are receiving other forms of support through the specialist training and employment programme. The programme is supported and funded by a range of Jewish institutions

[Kate Green]

and private donors and by a refugee taskforce that has been formed by a number of local, community and religious denominations that have wanted to support the work that World Jewish Relief does for refugees. That is supported by the Jewish Council for Racial Equality and it gives a much wider group of people the opportunity to participate in and support that worthwhile endeavour.

It is because I take a broad policy interest in refugee work that I have come to know about the work of World Jewish Relief, but in fact it is close on our doorsteps in the north of England. I particularly commend it for working with a group of people who present particular challenges as a result of the trauma and difficulties that they have experienced. I know that the friendships and relationships formed between the refugees and those supporting them will have enriched the lives of everyone involved. Once again, as we have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), we hear of a Jewish community that is not inward-looking but outward-looking. It looks to the country that it is a part of: it looks to be a part of it, and to form and strengthen relations with all its friends and neighbours. We are all immensely lucky that it wants to behave in that way, and that it does so.

3.29 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I begin by thanking and congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing this debate. As he set out very eloquently, the Jewish community has been part of the United Kingdom for hundreds of years and is today represented in all walks of life.

There is no Jewish community of any size in my Wolverhampton South East constituency, although we do have a Jewish cemetery that was donated to the community by the Duke of Sutherland when there was nowhere proper for Jewish people who died in the city to be buried. The cemetery exists to this day. I have been working with the Board of Deputies to try to make sure that it is properly cared for and restored, because, of course, when cemeteries are no longer actively used, they can fall into disrepair.

We are here to emphasise the positives today and I concur with that, but I want to make a few remarks about the growth that we have seen in antisemitism and how I believe we need to respond to it. It affects people on the hard right of politics, and has done for a long time—it comes from people on the hard right of politics—but it is also now coming from people on the hard left. We have seen much of that in recent years, including some appalling and awful abuse directed at my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and other Jewish MPs, both online and offline. It is simply unacceptable, it is deeply disturbing and we have to respond to it in the right way.

As someone who has been a member of the Labour party for 35 years, it is particularly disturbing for me to see antisemitism in the Labour party. We have always prided ourselves on being a party for people of all faiths and none—that is in the best of the Labour tradition—so it is very sad to see antisemitism in our party; there is no denying that it is there and has been there in recent years.

Some of it is wrapped up in a debate about the middle east and about Israel and Palestine and so on, but there is no need for it to be so. To state some obvious truths, the Israeli Prime Minister and the Israeli Government are not the same thing as Israeli society. There is an open and active debate in that country about policy, about settlements, about peace and about direction. Millions of Israeli citizens who take very contrasting views on those issues participate in that debate on a daily basis.

Ruth Smeeth: One of the most fascinating things about the debate in our party at the moment is that when we look at politics in the middle east, and specifically in Israel, my family who live in Israel campaign against Netanyahu day in, day out, and yet I am held responsible for his actions over here.

Mr McFadden: That is a very good illustration of my point. It is just the same as the fact that in this country we have a Government and a Prime Minister—perhaps a new one soon—and millions of our own citizens will disagree with the Government or the policies they pursue.

It is also the case that there are many people who care passionately about the Palestinian cause, who want to see a Palestinian state and who want to see a better deal for the Palestinian people. They can argue that case with passion and conviction, without being antisemitic. Many people do that on a daily basis. Caring about those issues does not mean that there is a need to engage in antisemitism.

We then have to ask ourselves a more difficult question. Where does this come from? What is really driving it? I believe that there is a further, wider problem, which is about an overall anti-western sentiment, which combines hostility to Israel with being anti-American, and which creates a fertile ground for the sentiments. I do not believe that that anti-western sentiment is part of the Labour tradition. It has never been part of the policy or the outlook of any Labour Government. I believe that if we really want to deal with the issue in our party and on the left, we have to reject that anti-western sentiment as well. These sentiments do not come from nowhere. We can do what we can about processes and complaints procedures and committees, but unless we are clear that our world view must not give rise to it, we will not really be able to deal with this issue.

I am disturbed by the antisemitism on the left. It is important that we stand strongly against it, that we do not accept any world view that gives rise to it, and that we state clearly that we are a party of all faiths and none. Britain's great strength as a country is that it is a country for all faiths and none. That is why we have been a refuge for the oppressed from around the world for so many years. That is why we are recognised as such around the world.

So, there should be no hierarchy of victimhood. There should be no sense that only some people are victims of racism and other people cannot be victims of racism. We have to reject these things and appreciate that we are admired around the world precisely because we have been, for the most part, a refuge for people fleeing from persecution. We have given people a platform to build new lives. It is not a perfect story—it never is, and of course there have been times and episodes when

that has not been the case—but it is largely true. Over the long arc of history, it is the story of how our society has developed up to today.

We should give thanks to the Jewish community for the contribution that has been made over hundreds of years, in all walks of life, to the United Kingdom, and resolve anew that we believe in equality and in a politics and a country that can be a good home for people of all faiths and none.

3.37 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As always, it is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair and to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. As hon. Members have done, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing and opening the debate. I have the pleasure of winding up on behalf of the Scottish National party. Although it has been a very short debate, and not a lot of hon. Members are present, we have made up in quality for what we do not have in quantity.

I have come to know the hon. Member for City of Chester through a standing engagement. It used to be a weekly engagement, but it has now moved to monthly—one of the longest-running Public Bill Committees in this Parliament. Over the last year or so, I have come to know the hon. Gentleman, and I would have expected nothing less than for him to pay a typically warm tribute to the Jewish community in the UK. He gave an absolutely outstanding history and chronology of the UK's Jewish community. He was right to mention that there are around 5,900 Jewish people in Scotland. They are largely based in the constituency of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who I know would want to be here today but cannot be. I pay tribute to the close relationship he has with the Jewish community there.

As always, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) spoke very powerfully. She spoke about her family's history as immigrants from Poland and Russia. It certainly sounds like her grandmother would be a fantastic person to spend time with, and the hon. Lady did her proud.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) is always a strong voice in this place for refugees, and she spoke about the work that World Jewish Relief does, particularly on moving people into employment.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) made reference to the cemetery in his constituency. I, too, have a Jewish cemetery in my constituency. There is not much of a Jewish population in Glasgow East, but there is still a Jewish cemetery on Hallhill Road. Thankfully, it is kept very well. When driving down one of the more significant streets in my constituency, all those headstones with a Star of David on them are a reminder that Jews are such a massive part of the community. The right hon. Gentleman also spoke candidly about some of the challenges in the Labour party. I know that may not be an easy thing to do in the current climate. He was brave to raise how some of this antisemitism has come from the left.

I also want to put on record my enormous thanks to the Jewish community, particularly in Scotland, for its immense contribution to our country. We should be very proud of the diversity of modern Scotland, while never taking it for granted. The Scottish National party could not be clearer that Scotland's Jewish community

needs to be assured and feel safe, against a worrying backdrop of growing antisemitism across Europe and further afield.

Like anyone who calls Scotland home, Scotland's Jewish communities have the right to feel comfortable as they go about daily life free from intolerance, and religious or antisemitic hatred. Following last year's shocking attack in Pennsylvania, that is more important than ever. We utterly condemn without equivocation anyone who threatens the existence of Israel. Israel has a right to exist peacefully. The Israel-Palestine situation should not be used as some kind of justification for attacks on Jewish people or abuse towards Jewish people, as it seems to be now more than ever. Therefore, we condemn any attempt to do so and any expression of antisemitism.

Given the rise in reports of hate crimes and hate speech in the UK last June, and homophobic attacks, such as that in Orlando, as well as the antisemitic voices on the so-called alt-right, it is more important than ever to learn the lessons of the past. That is why we support work to tackle religious hatred and intolerance, including Scotland's national commemoration of the holocaust and subsequent genocides, so that lessons are learned about what can happen if hatred and discrimination remain unchecked, and seep through into our society. The Scottish Government accept in full, without equivocation, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. It is disappointing that it has taken quite a long time for people to get on board with that.

I want to come back to the wider issue of freedom of religion and belief, which is essential for any democratic, functioning society. Whether we are Christians, Jews or Muslims, bringing faith communities around the table is key to building a cohesive, respectful society. We still have a lot more to do on that, even in 2019. Scottish Interfaith Week is an excellent example of how Scottish communities are working together to improve dialogue with one another on matters of religious, national and civic importance.

I want to finish my remarks, as I normally do, by bringing the topic back home to Glasgow East, and referring to one of my predecessors in this House. A few years ago, I had the real pleasure of visiting Glasgow's Garnethill Synagogue, to look at some of the Jewish archives. Shamefully, it was only then that I began to learn more about Myer Galpern, who was the MP for my constituency, then Glasgow Shettleston, from 1959 to 1979. He was Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons during his last term in office. Myer Galpern was not only the first Jewish Lord Provost of Glasgow but the first Jewish Provost in Scotland. Sadly, that is a little known fact, which we should do more to recognise and celebrate in Glasgow. I will pursue that with Glasgow City Council.

In conclusion, the Jewish community made an enormous contribution to Scotland long before Myer Galpern, and I look forward to its continuing to make an enormous contribution to the rich, tartan tapestry of Scotland for many more years to come.

3.43 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I send my best wishes for a speedy recovery to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West

[*Rachael Maskell*]

(Naz Shah), who was due to respond to the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing the debate. We have known each other for a significant amount of time—a couple of decades—and I can testify to how committed he is not only to celebrating diversity, but to furthering the rights and opportunities of all in society. He has done so today eloquently for our Jewish friends across the United Kingdom.

I was particularly moved by the family story of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), much of which I had not heard before. I have very fond memories of working with her mother, who was a tour de force in the trade union movement. My hon. Friend has proved to be that, too. Given the lineage from her grandmother, I can very much see where that comes from.

Today's debate celebrates the incredible investment that the UK's Jewish communities have made to our nation. If I may, for one moment I will highlight my own Jewish community in York. York's Jewish community may be small, but it is fast-growing, and it is certainly growing in its impact on our city. Determined not to look back to the tragic massacre of Clifford's Tower in 1190, the community is building a new story to be told in our city, marked by community action and an impressive contribution to York's faith forum.

We heard earlier from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) about the faith communities in Manchester and Glasgow, and the contribution that they can make to our communities. The work of the faith forum in York stands out across the country. This is not just about the Jewish community; the Muslim community is known for how they came out to greet the English Defence League with tea and biscuits when it marched in our city. They broke the anger and changed that situation, the like of which has not been seen in our city since.

Since I was elected, it has been a real honour to work with York's Jewish community. In particular, Ben Rich has led significant dialogue in our city, not least when I approached him to provide training for our Labour party on antisemitism, and I was delighted that he accepted that. We have had positive feedback from the significant number of people who attended. I believe that again sets out best practice.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for highlighting, in his usual eloquent style, the real discourse about the political debate on identity, culture and faith. He is absolutely right that even one incident of antisemitism must be a cause of great concern. We have to know our history to know how crucial it is to be on top of the issue and to address it as a matter of urgency.

While I am still giving thanks, I pass on my thanks to the Jewish Leadership Council, which does outstanding work, especially on advancing good practice and taking forward so many initiatives across our country, particularly with its work on care for the elderly. We are reminded of the importance of that work today. It is so important that we have a real understanding of the diversity, identity, culture and innovations that come from all communities across the UK, and that we celebrate them in their own right, whether through our culture, our economy, our society or personally.

Many third-sector organisations, such as Jewish Care and Norwood, have made outstanding contributions to our country. I knew those organisations particularly well when I worked with them as a trade union official. Now, as a Member of Parliament, I work closely with the Holocaust Educational Trust as it leads the dialogue on remembering the past, addressing prejudice in society today and bringing the issue so close to home. It was a delight to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) about the incredible work that World Jewish Relief is doing with refugees. Again, that brings home the importance of the work across our communities, to welcome strangers and embrace all that they have to bring.

As a trade unionist—I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—I have witnessed incredible contributions, not least from my hon. Friends, to advancing workers' rights on behalf of the Jewish community. We are reminded of the important work contributed, across our trade union movement, towards anti-fascism. Like my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester, I highlight the amazing work that the Community Security Trust does in an interfaith context to ensure the safety and security of residents, particularly in the Jewish community.

On Mitzvah Day, people across the country make a phenomenal contribution: some 40,000 people from the Jewish community come out to serve their community. In York, that has expressed itself in recent years through tree planting to alleviate flooding issues, but that is just one of 1,000 projects to meet local needs in communities. I thank people for opening up their hearts and their doors to our communities and reaching out. While I am speaking about opening doors, I should also say that I have very much enjoyed visiting my local Jewish community on a number of occasions to share Shabbat and share fellowship with my friends in it.

It is not just a question of charity. Our economy thrives because of all that the Jewish community has contributed over time. The hard work and innovation of many people within the Jewish community has broadened our economic footprint in the UK and beyond. I enjoyed hearing my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester explain how fish and chips came to our country—I am sure that will feature in a future pub quiz. We also celebrate the Jewish community's contribution to science, medicine, sport, literature and the arts in the UK. Whether they are Nobel prize winners or have simply made a contribution in their own right, we celebrate all who have participated in advancing our country.

As we mark the 75th anniversary of D-day, it is worth noting not only the 50,000 people from the Jewish community who served in our armed forces in the first world war, but the more than 60,000 who served in the second. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

I am thankful that many people from the Jewish community have served in this place. Our Labour party has been an important home to many from across the Jewish community over the years, with radical thinking about change and about how we want to shape and transform our society. We have supported the struggles that discrimination has brought and have stood in solidarity with those who face challenges. We are determined to rebuild that trust. It cannot be given; it must be demonstrated and earned.

At a time when we are seeing the rise of fascism across our nation, with people being othered because of their identity, culture or creed, it is vital that we unite and drive forward radical change across our communities to ensure that all feel safe and welcome in our nation. Together, we must celebrate the contributions that come clearly from the values that lie at the heart of the Jewish community in both culture and faith.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): As always, Sir David, it is a privilege and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing this important debate and granting us the opportunity to reflect on the significant social, political, cultural and economic contributions that the Jewish community makes to our great United Kingdom. We must also pay thanks to the Jewish Leadership Council and Lord Levy for planting the seed of this debate.

I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his first-rate opening speech. In a reasonably short time, he gave us an excellent overview of the full breadth and history of the Jewish community's contribution to our country, and he should be commended for doing so with an incredibly positive and warm tone. I thank all other hon. Members who have participated in the debate; I will address the specific remarks made by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) later in my speech.

I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for sharing her family story. I am glad that she did not take her grandmother's advice, but has brought her ideas to this place. No one who has heard the hon. Lady speak on these issues, in this House or elsewhere, could fail to be struck by her force and passion. Our public discourse and debate in this place is the richer for her participation—and I am not sure that I will be able to look at tomatoes in the same way when I am at the supermarket this weekend.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for his intelligent, thoughtful and powerful speech. He spoke not only with incredible bravery but with clarity and force—and without any notes, as far as I could tell. I look forward to re-reading his excellent speech.

Late in his life, the great writer and polemicist Christopher Hitchens discovered that his mother was Jewish and that, by extension, so was he. When he told his oldest friend, Martin Amis, Amis replied, "You know, I find I'm jealous." How else could he feel, when the Jewish people have the one of the most enviable records of achievement of any demographic group in the United Kingdom's history? Despite only ever forming a small percentage of the population, British Jews have shone in almost every field. They have inspired and entertained, created and innovated. They have become our doctors, our philosophers, our inventors, our musicians, our writers, our leaders, our role models, our parliamentarians and, indeed, one of our Prime Ministers.

It is only right that we celebrate the great achievements of the Jewish community, whose contributions have truly shaped our nation's journey and identity. Before we do so, however, I must take note of the fact that a couple of hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East, referred to ongoing

incidents of prejudice, abuse and discrimination. It is deeply disappointing that that issue still arises in our society; it should be tackled unflinchingly where it occurs. Those who face such displays of bigotry should know that the British Government and everybody in this Chamber stand with them and support them.

I am always struck by the phenomenally strong community spirit that is shown by the Jewish community here in Britain. He will not thank me for saying it, and he did not insert it into my speech, but my private secretary, who is sitting a couple of rows behind me, is a shining example of that, as I discover whenever I glean what he has been up to in his weekend activity.

The community has social action at its heart. The very word for charity in Hebrew is derived from the word for justice. The biggest Jewish charity, Jewish Care, is one of the 100 largest charities in the UK. It provides care to more than 10,000 people a week and has 15 care homes, 13 community centres and four independent living communities. It is an inspiration to the rest of us, showing how much can be done within a community to support those in need.

Similarly, Norwood, which began in the 1700s as a hospital in the east end of London, has flourished and grown over the centuries to support people of all ages. It highlights just how generous the community is with its time and resources, with 500 volunteers and £12 million raised every year to maintain its amazing and precious programmes.

The community strives to look after the vulnerable—not only within it but in the wider world. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) gave the example of Mitzvah Day, when Jewish community groups and individuals up and down the country join forces with those of all faiths and none, volunteering their time to support those in need in their local community. That positive, collaborative social action is underpinned and inspired by the Jewish values of kindness, justice and shared responsibility. Last year, Mitzvah Day joined with Muslim Aid to launch a huge event to feed London's homeless and vulnerable with that most famous of Jewish dishes—chicken soup.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston spoke about the amazing work of World Jewish Relief, a charity founded by a small Jewish group in London in the 1930s. It now co-ordinates important relief efforts all over the world and helps people of all denominations; it has recently helped refugees in the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in Myanmar and cyclone victims in Mozambique. Of course, it would be remiss of me not to join other hon. Members in mentioning the invaluable role of the Community Security Trust, which seeks to ensure the safety and security of Jewish communities and other communities across the United Kingdom.

Finally, no summary of the Jewish contribution to British public life would be complete without mention of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the national representative body of the UK's Jewish community. As the longest-established religious minority in the UK, the Jewish people have led the way in demonstrating how to integrate fully and participate in our national life while retaining a distinct and proud identity, and that process has been led by the Board of Deputies. It has shown the way since 1760 in how to interact with the Government and fight for the rights of a group, while fostering good relations with those of other faiths and remaining perfectly integrated in wider society.

[*Rishi Sunak*]

I will turn briefly from the community at large to the role of some individuals. It is no exaggeration at all to say that if I were merely to list every Jewish person who has achieved a record of note in UK society, we would be here for some weeks. However, I will give only a small sample, just a handful of those who have helped to shape our United Kingdom and what it is today. In the arts, I could mention Mike Leigh and Nicholas Hytner, Amy Winehouse and Yehudi Menuhin, Maureen Lipman and Sacha Baron Cohen; in academia, Simon Schama and Robert Winston; in the media, John Diamond and Jonathan Freedland; in art and design, Lucian Freud and Malcolm McLaren; Lord Neuberger, a President of the Supreme Court; Peter George Davis, the founder of the Special Boat Service; Jack Cohen, the founder of Tesco; and Ludwig Guttman, the founder of the Paralympics.

I could mention many thousands of others who have founded the British businesses that we use every day and that provide employment for many, who have designed the technology that we use at work and at home, who have shaped the ideas that we follow, and who provide the entertainment we enjoy to rest and relax. I could speak for many hours, but in the interests of time we should press on.

I will end, therefore, by again thanking the hon. Member for City of Chester. He has done all of us a very valuable service. He has brought us together here today, to recognise, to celebrate and to be grateful for the invaluable contribution made by the Jewish community to the United Kingdom.

I stand here as someone who is the son of immigrants, and as someone who is proudly British, proudly Asian and proudly Hindu. I passionately believe that our

society is richer for its diversity, and the Jewish community is a proud and shining testament to that.

4.2 pm

Christian Matheson: That was an excellent speech by the Minister, and I thank him for it. As he said, this debate has been characterised by speeches that have been at once passionate, extremely thoughtful and thought-provoking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) reminded us of her mum, who was indeed my boss and the boss of my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). What the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North did not tell us, of course, was that her mum started off in a fairly lowly position, as a secretary, and simply through hard work and strength of character she rose to become deputy general secretary of our trade union. Hard work and strength of character are often qualities that we associate very much with the Jewish community.

I am most grateful to all hon. Members who have taken part in this debate and helped to celebrate the contribution of the Jewish community. I have to say that perhaps Thursday afternoon is not the best time to get the maximum attendance for a debate, but any time is the best time to celebrate and give thanks for that contribution and, once again, I am most grateful to all hon. Members who have assisted in that today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the contribution of the Jewish Community to the UK.

4.3 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 13 June 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Local Industrial Strategies

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our modern industrial strategy is a long-term plan to boost productivity and earning power for people throughout the country.

Since 2010, local leaders, working in partnership with Government, have delivered historic city deals with Greater Manchester. There have been multiple devolution agreements resulting in devolved new powers including bus reform, the adult education budget and growth deal funding of £633 million.

Building on these strong foundations, we set out in the modern industrial strategy to work in partnership with places to develop local industrial strategies. Local industrial strategies are central to our aim of creating prosperous communities across the country. They are being developed locally and agreed with government. They are long-term, based on clear evidence and aligned to the modern industrial strategy.

On 16 May we launched the first of these strategies, the West Midlands local industrial strategy. Today we are launching the Greater Manchester local industrial strategy. This has been developed locally by the Greater Manchester combined authority, led by Mayor Andy Burnham, and Sir Richard Leese, Leader of Manchester City Council, supported by the local enterprise partnership and Greater Manchester partners, and agreed with Government.

This ambitious strategy sets out how Greater Manchester will work in partnership with Government to:

Set Greater Manchester up to be a global leader on health and care innovation, creating new industries and jobs, improving population health and extending healthy life expectancy, and working to identify a home for a prospective international centre for healthy ageing;

Position Greater Manchester as a world leading region for innovative firms to experiment with, develop and adopt advanced materials in manufacturing, including University of Manchester work to establish “Graphene City” in the centre;

Build on Greater Manchester’s position as a leading European digital city-region, to maximise growing assets in cyber security;

Enable the digitalisation of all sectors, and capitalise on the links between digital and creative industries that feed internationally significant clusters in broadcasting, content creation and media;

Launch the UK’s first city-region clean growth mission to achieve carbon neutral living in Greater Manchester by 2038; and

Ensure that the education, skills and employment system allow everyone to reach their potential and employers have access to the skills required to deliver the Greater Manchester local industrial strategy.

Greater Manchester is a growing economy with a growing population of 2.8 million. Our shared national and local ambition is for the Greater Manchester local industrial strategy to boost productivity and people’s earning power through our collaborative national, regional and local leadership, recognising the economic strengths and potential of Greater Manchester.

A copy of the Greater Manchester local industrial strategy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1616]

CABINET OFFICE

Boundary Commission for England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): I should like to inform the House that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office has made the following appointments under schedule 1 to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 following a competition run in accordance with the governance code on public appointments:

Colin Byrne, appointed as a member of the Boundary Commission for England, effective

from 1 July 2019 until 30 June 2024; and

Sarah Hamilton, appointed as a member of the Boundary Commission for England, effective

from 1 July 2019 until 30 June 2024.

[HCWS1625]

TREASURY

UK Debt Management Office

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The United Kingdom Debt Management Office (DMO) has today published its business plan for the financial year 2019-20. Copies have been deposited in the Libraries of both houses and are available on the DMO’s website, www.dmo.gov.uk.

[HCWS1622]

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Luxembourg on 14 June 2019.

ECOFIN will be preceded by a morning meeting of the European Investment Bank (EIB) board of governors: *Annual EIB board of governors meeting*

The meeting of the EIB board of governors will include: statements from the Chairman, President and Chairman of the Audit Committee; a governors discussion: a presentation on the annual report of the Audit Committee; and a vote for partial renewal of the Audit Committee. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury).

Following this, EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following at ECOFIN:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 13 June meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

Banking union

The Council will be invited to endorse a progress report on the Banking Union.

Financial transaction tax

Ministers will receive a progress update in relation to the enhanced co-operation in the area of financial transaction tax.

G20 follow-up

The Council presidency and Commission will present the main outcomes of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and central bank governors, which took place on 8-9 June in Fukuoka, Japan.

European semester

Ministers will discuss the draft 2019 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) and progress towards the Europe 2020 targets.

Stability and growth pact

Ministers will be invited to adopt Council decisions and recommendations on the implementation of the stability and growth pact.

Clean planet

Ministers will exchange views on a strategic long-term vision for a climate-neutral economy.

Non-performing loans

Under any other business, the commission will provide an update on the implementation of the action plan to tackle non-performing loans in Europe.

[HCWS1623]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**News Media Merger**

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): My Department has today written to Lebedev Holdings Limited (LHL) and Independent Digital News and Media Limited (IDNM), the owners of the *Evening Standard* and *The Independent*, to inform them that I am minded to issue an intervention notice. This relates to concerns I have that there may be public interest considerations—as set out in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002—that are relevant to the recent acquisition of a 30% stake by the International Media Company (IMC) in LHL and the linked transaction involving the acquisition of a 30% stake by Scalable LP in IDNM and that these concerns warrant further investigation.

A “minded to” letter has therefore been issued to the parties on one public interest ground specified in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002:

(2A) The need for (a) accurate presentation of news; and (b) free expression of opinion.

It is important to note that I have not taken a final decision on intervention at this stage. In line with the statutory guidance on media mergers, the “minded to” letter invites further representations in writing from the parties and gives them until 5pm on Monday 17 June to respond. I plan to make my final decision, which needs

to be made on a quasi-judicial basis, on whether to issue an intervention notice no later than the week commencing 24 June.

If I decide to issue an intervention notice, the next stage would be for Ofcom to assess and report to me on the public interest concerns and for the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to assess and report to me on whether a relevant merger situation has been created and any impact this may have on competition. Following these reports, I would need to decide whether to refer the matter for a more detailed investigation by the CMA under section 45 of the Enterprise Act 2002.

In view of the time it has taken to obtain sufficient information to reach this point I have asked the parties to agree to extend the statutory time limit to allow Ofcom and the Competitions and Markets Authority to report to me on the public interest issues raised by the transaction.

I will keep Parliament updated on progress with this media merger case.

[HCWS1624]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**Agriculture and Fisheries Council**

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries policy will be on the regulation on the European maritime and fisheries fund (EMFF) for which a preliminary agreement on the proposal, a partial general approach (PGA), is sought in Council. It will constitute the Council’s mandate for negotiations with the European Parliament.

The European Commission will also present its communication on the state of play of the common fisheries policy (CFP) and consultation on the fishing opportunities for 2020, after which Ministers will exchange views.

In the field of agriculture the main focus will be on the post-2020 common agricultural policy (CAP) reform package for which the Romanian presidency has provided a progress report on the negotiations during their presidency. The progress report will be discussed at Council. The reform package covers the three legislative proposals: regulation on CAP strategic plans, regulation on financing, management and monitoring of the CAP, and regulation on common market organisation (CMO) of agricultural products.

There are currently no items scheduled for discussion under “any other business”.

[HCWS1619]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**Foreign Affairs Council**

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) will take place in Luxembourg on 17 June. It will be chaired by

the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini.

The FAC will discuss current affairs, the effectiveness of the EU common foreign and security partnership (CFSP) as well as the EU's global strategy, Sudan, and over lunch with the Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, the middle east peace process.

Current affairs

We expect HRVP Mogherini to debrief Ministers on her trip to the horn of Africa and the developing political situation in the region. HRVP Mogherini will also provide an update on recent developments in Venezuela, including on the international contact group and Lima group ministerial meeting held in New York on 3 June. We expect Iran to be raised following Iran's announcement to partially cease meeting commitments under the Iran nuclear deal and given the upcoming 60-day deadline. We expect HRVP Mogherini and Ministers to consider next steps as we seek to avoid further escalation.

CFSP effectiveness and the EU global strategy

Foreign Ministers will consider how the EU can improve its approach to foreign and security policy. Defence Ministers will join Foreign Ministers for a strategic debate on the EU's global strategy and how it works internationally. They will consider the EU's role on security, burden sharing and coherence among defence initiatives.

Sudan

Following the UK's request, Ministers will discuss the situation in Sudan, taking stock of recent political events, including the Sudanese security forces' use of violence on civilians, and consider how the EU should respond to support the African Union in ensuring a transition to civilian rule.

Lunch on MEPP with the Jordanian Foreign Minister

The Jordanian Foreign Minister is expected to join EU Ministers to discuss the middle east peace process, prior to the EU-Jordan Association Council. Ahead of the publication of the Kushner plan, the UK will reiterate its support for a two state solution and encourage all parties to keep an open mind once the plan is published. The UK will note the importance of HM King Abdullah II's role as custodian of the Christian and Muslim holy sites, and reiterate our long-standing position on Jerusalem.

Council conclusions

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions on effective multilateralism; security and defence; central Asia strategy; the EU's engagement in the Black sea region; strengthening the ban on anti-personnel mines; and human rights guidelines on safe drinking water and sanitation.

[HCWS1620]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Fortification of Flour

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): Further to the Government's announcement on 23 October 2018 of the intention to consult on the issue of mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to help prevent

neural tube defects in foetuses, I wish to inform the House that the consultation will launch today and will run for 12 weeks.

Neural tube defects are birth defects of the brain, spine, or spinal cord. They happen in the first few weeks of pregnancy, often before a woman even knows that she is pregnant. The two most common neural tube defects are spina bifida and anencephaly. These can be devastating conditions and the Government are fully aware of the effect these have on the individuals themselves and their families.

There is strong evidence that many neural tube defects can be prevented by increasing women's intake of folic acid.

Unless you are pregnant or thinking of having a baby, you should be able to get all the folate (the natural form of folic acid) you need by eating a varied and balanced diet. Existing pregnancy advice to women who are trying to conceive or who are likely to become pregnant is that they are advised to take a daily supplement of 400 micrograms of folic acid until the 12th week of pregnancy. They are also advised to increase their daily intake of folate by eating more folate-rich foods, for example spinach and broccoli, and foods voluntarily fortified with folic acid such as a wide range of breakfast cereals.

However, we know that in the UK around half of pregnancies are unplanned. In those which are planned, it has been estimated that only half of all mothers took folic acid supplements or modified their diet to increase folate intake. This has led to calls for mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid, so women can get it from dietary sources other than foods that naturally contain it.

The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) has recommended mandatory folic acid fortification of flour to improve the folate status of women most at risk of neural tube defect-affected pregnancies. Further detail on this is in the consultation document.

We are now opening a consultation to seek views on this proposed change and we hope that members of the public as well as industry and the scientific community respond so we can accurately consider this proposal.

I have agreed with the Governments of Scotland and Wales, and the permanent secretary of Northern Ireland that this will be a joint consultation between the devolved Administrations and England. This is because any resulting decisions would need to be taken on a whole-UK basis to minimise impact on trade and for industry to comply. Similarly, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been closely involved as flour falls within its remit.

[HCWS1618]

JUSTICE

Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am pleased to announce that the Government are today introducing in the House of Commons the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill.

This legislation follows the Government's response to the consultation on reform of the legal requirements for divorce in England and Wales. I previously laid this response before Parliament [*Official Report*, 9 April 2019 Vol. 658 c.8WS].

Marriage and family have long been vitally important to our functioning as a society. Where a marriage or civil partnership regrettably breaks down and is beyond repair, the law must deal with that reality with the minimum of acrimony by creating the conditions for people to move forward and agree arrangements for the future in an orderly and constructive way. Above all, the legal process should not exacerbate conflict between parents, as this is especially damaging for children. The process must better support and encourage parents to co-operate in bringing up their children.

The evidence is clear that the current legal requirements can needlessly rake up the past to justify the legal ending of a relationship that is no longer a beneficial and functioning one. The requirement for one person to blame the other—if it is not practical for them to have separated for at least two years—can introduce or worsen conflict at the outset of the process, conflict that may continue long after the legal process has concluded. Allegations about a spouse's conduct may bear no relation to the real cause of the breakdown. Such allegations do not serve the interests of society or help family relationships to heal. Instead, they can be damaging to any prospects for couples to reconcile or to agree practical arrangements for the future. In the extremely difficult circumstances of divorce, the law should allow couples, where reconciliation is not possible, to move on constructively.

The Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill will change or remove conflict flashpoints. It will align the law with the non-confrontational approach that Parliament has enacted in other areas of family law. Among its measures, the Bill will replace the requirement to prove spousal conduct or for the couple to have been separated for at least two years with the requirement to file a statement of irretrievable breakdown of the marriage or civil partnership. It will introduce a new minimum period of 20 weeks between the start of proceedings and confirmation to the court that the conditional order should be made. This will make the period before the conditional order is granted longer for most people, and so allow better opportunity for reflecting on the decision to divorce and, where this is inevitable, agreeing practical arrangements for the future.

This is an important piece of legislation that will bring long overdue reform. It is not about making the decision to divorce or to dissolve a civil partnership easier. That will remain one of the hardest decisions anyone can take. It is about reforming those elements of the current legal process that can exacerbate conflict and cause unnecessary distress at an already difficult time, and better supporting agreement about arrangements for the future. I know that hon. and right hon. Members will take great interest in this opportunity to make a positive impact on the lives of the many families who sadly find themselves affected by breakdown. My Ministerial colleagues and I look forward to working with them through the passage of the Bill.

[HCWS1621]

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The final Justice and Home Affairs Council of the Romanian EU presidency recently took place in Luxembourg. I attended on 6 June for justice day, and Sir Tim Barrow, Permanent Representative of the UK to the EU, and Chris Jones, Director of the Europe Directorate at the Home Office, attended on interior day on 7 June.

Justice day began with a discussion on the regulation on the assignment of claims, which has far-reaching implications for financial markets, including the ability of small businesses to access credit. It was agreed that work in this area will need to continue under the Finnish presidency.

The Council then discussed digitalisation of judicial co-operation, where the presidency considered the UK's position that a thorough cost-benefit analysis was needed before proceeding, along with plenty of time for member states to implement this measure effectively. In general, however, member states supported a mandatory and de-centralised approach to digitalisation in the interests of speed and efficiency of justice systems.

Ministers then discussed the future direction of substantive criminal law co-operation. Member states were clear that implementation of existing criminal law measures should be prioritised before considering new legislation and a thorough analysis of the benefits of these measures would be needed before further harmonisation. Nonetheless, momentum began to form around the harmonisation of criminal law on environmental crime, identity theft, and manipulation of elections.

After a working lunch discussing the use of judicial training to foster mutual trust, there was a policy debate on mutual recognition in criminal matters. Discussions focused on facilitating the practical application of existing legal instruments, including by means of judicial training, rather than on new legislative proposals. The Commission stressed the importance of fundamental rights, and an independent judiciary to enable mutual recognition tools, like the European arrest warrant (EAW), to operate. The UK underlined our commitment to continued co-operation in this field and several member states supported the idea of common guidelines on this. Some advocated EU legislation on the transfer of criminal proceedings to close loopholes, particularly where suspected criminals cannot—for whatever reason—be surrendered under the EAW.

The Council then adopted mandates for negotiations with the United States, and in the Council of Europe (Budapest convention), on cross-border access to e-evidence. The Commission noted its intention to insist that the United States agree to an EU-wide approach which would apply to all member states without discrimination, including at the EU-US ministerial meeting in Bucharest later this month. Formal negotiations will not begin until finalisation of internal EU legislation on e-evidence. The UK has not opted into either the internal EU legislation on e-evidence, or the mandates for negotiations with the US, and in the Council of Europe, and will not be bound by those mandates.

Council adopted 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. The UK

supported these conclusions as we support the work of Eurojust, and agrees that better co-ordination between networks hosted by Eurojust would be helpful for criminal justice co-operation.

The Council also adopted conclusions on the retention of data for the purpose of fighting crime, which proposed further exploration of options for lawful regimes in member states. The UK believes the appropriate retention of telecommunications data for law enforcement purposes is an important element of an effective law enforcement system and supported these conclusions. The Commission provided 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 Council adopted an implementing decision confirming that the UK could connect to the Prüm automated system for exchanging DNA data between law enforcement authorities in EU member states.

Interior day began with a discussion on the future of EU law enforcement. Ministers agreed that further co-operation on approaches to law enforcement would make for more effective cross-border law enforcement. The Council supported effective implementation of existing legislation, especially interoperability of databases, and recognised the need to address the impacts of technological advancements on law enforcement, supporting Europol's role in pooling expertise and providing technological and analytical support. The UK Permanent Representative to the EU intervened to support this work and welcome the intent to work together, co-ordinate methods and approaches and support the proposal for a Europol innovation hub. In this context, the UK intervention additionally highlighted UK work to tackle online harms through the UK White Paper.

Under AOB, the Council CT co-ordinator (Gilles de Kerchove) presented on the implications on law enforcement of the move to 5G. The CT co-ordinator focused on the need for the EU to influence 5G standards, to ensure a dialogue with service providers on this issue, and to consider EU legislation to avoid fragmentation of member state approaches. The Commissioner for the Security Union (Sir Julian King) noted the Commission's intent to develop an EU risk assessment and toolbox of options to mitigate risks by the end of 2019.

The chair of the counter-terrorism group, a non-EU grouping of European states intelligence agencies, attended to update the JHA Council on the general terrorist threat and the challenges and opportunities from new tools and technologies. The CTG chair also updated on discussions on co-operation with Europol on strategic and technical issues, noting that operational intelligence work remained the sole responsibility of member states.

Over lunch and in the afternoon session, Ministers discussed migration, with a focus on issues of solidarity and redistribution of migrants. Member states remain split on the EU's approach to these issues. The UK intervention focused 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 Council agreed a partial 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.

The Council also agreed 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.

[HCWS1626]

TRANSPORT

Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

The Transport Council took place in Luxembourg on Thursday 6 June. This was the only Transport Council under the Romanian presidency (the presidency). The UK was represented by the UK's Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, Katrina Williams.

The Council reached a general approach on the third tranche of the "mobility package" for a legal framework for the electronic communication of freight transport information. The UK welcomed the work that the presidency had done to achieve compromises on this text, as did a number of other member states.

The presidency gave a progress report on the proposal from the third tranche of the "mobility package" to streamline planning and approval processes for projects on the trans-European transport network (TEN-T). Some delegations took the opportunity to flag outstanding concerns including scope, the role of the single competent authority and the duration of the permit granting process.

There was also a progress report on the proposal from the first tranche of the "mobility package" hired vehicles directive, although discussion illustrated that there are still outstanding issues to be resolved.

The Council was also given a progress report on the proposal from the first tranche of the "mobility package" to revise the current directive on Eurovignette (road charging). The UK intervened to highlight the need for flexibility in determining national charging schemes, a view shared by a number of other member states.

Over lunch, Ministers from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine along with representatives from the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development participated in a joint discussion with the Council and Commissioners Bulc and Hahn on the progress made by the eastern area partnership (EaP) in developing the external dimension of the TEN-T policy. Welcoming the progress made in relation to road safety, TEN-T connectivity and planning for future investment in transport infrastructure, the Council endorsed the joint EU-EaP declaration as a road map for future co-operation.

Later, the Council was given a further progress report on negotiations on the proposals to revise the regulation on rail passengers' rights and obligations.

Finally, there were several information points from member states, the presidency and Commissioner Bulc under any other business. Several member states supported Luxembourg's call for consideration of aviation taxation as an additional means to tackle emissions reduction. The presidency gave information on discussions in other Councils on "A clean planet for all", the Commission's long-term climate strategy. On addressing airspace capacity, Commissioner Bulc noted the recent publications of the airspace architecture study and the wise person's report on the future of air traffic management. The Commission noted the first findings of its study on sustainable transport

infrastructure charging and the internalisation of transport externalities, which was published on the day of the Council, and updated the Council on the connectivity outcomes of the EU-China summit. The presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals and the Polish delegation provided information on the conference on "Benefits for regions resulting from the implementation of the route Via Carpatia". Finally, Finland presented transport plans for its forthcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union.

[HCWS1617]

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