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17 June 2019**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 17 June 2019

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

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

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 662

THIRTY-SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2017-2019

House of Commons

Monday 17 June 2019

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Housing Ladder

1. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What steps he is taking to help young people get on the housing ladder. [911351]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Since 2010, more than half a million people have been helped into home ownership through Government-backed schemes, including Help to Buy and the right to buy. The recent independent evaluation of the Help to Buy equity loan scheme found that 63% of first-time buyers using it were under 35.

Giles Watling: While the lifting of the housing revenue account cap is welcome and will deliver more council-built homes, which will be used to meet the long-standing demand for council housing across the country, we need

more private homes. What more can the Government do to help the delivery of that private housing, which will bring prices down and increase the availability for young people?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend has made an important point about the housing revenue account cap and our desire to see more council homes built, but he is right to say that we also want to see a general increase in housing supply. Last year's figures show that more than 222,000 homes were delivered, the highest number for a decade. As my hon. Friend says, there is more to do, but I should emphasise to him that the number of first-time buyers is at an 11-year high.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Government are failing to meet the housing needs of young people in the south lakes, while ignoring the simple fact that thousands of local houses are sitting empty as second homes. Will the Secretary of State agree to change planning and tax regulations, so that we can limit second home ownership and give our young people the chance of a place to call their own?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman has highlighted the broader issue of the need to increase supply. We have made reforms to ensure that there is clarity in the planning process, and through the schemes that I have mentioned. However, if the hon. Gentleman's challenge is that there is more to do, yes, there is, and that is why we are determined to see that increase in supply. I think that is the best way to address the issues that he has highlighted in relation to his own constituency and others across the country.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): In my constituency, we are delivering homes at three times the rate of the country as a whole. Does my right hon. Friend agree that maintaining supply of all styles and tenures is the key to enabling young people to make a start on the housing ladder?

James Brokenshire: I do agree, and I am well aware of the housing opportunities that are being taken up in and around my hon. Friend's constituency and the work that is going on there. He has made a powerful point. If we ensure that all types and tenures of housing are being developed, that housing will be delivered more quickly, and that is where the focus lies.

14. [911366] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The average full-time salary among my constituents is above national norms at £37,500, but that is still way off the house price that the Government class as affordable, at £450,000, and it is half the cost of the average sale achieved in W5 in the first quarter of the year, which was £905,348. One flat even changed hands for £3.5 million. What are the Government doing to relieve the pressures on young people specifically in London, where salaries and speculation are forcing out everyone but the children of the super-rich?

James Brokenshire: About £9 billion is being spent on the affordable homes programme, and half of that is going to London. I hope that the hon. Lady will join me in encouraging the Mayor of London to focus on the delivery of housing of all types for all people, and to ensure that there is that bright prospect in London as well as the rest of the country.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): After nine years of Conservative government, why are nearly 900,000 fewer people under 45 able to own their own home?

James Brokenshire: It is interesting that the right hon. Gentleman should make that point. He may recall saying in the past that falling home ownership was not "such a bad thing". I should have thought that he would support the increase in delivery that I have mentioned, and, indeed, the fact that the number of first-time buyers is at an 11-year high.

John Healey: Is not the truth that the Government have been failing young people on housing for nine years? One in five of those on the Help to Buy scheme are not even first-time buyers, the average age of those on the right to buy scheme is over 50, and not a single one of the new starter homes that were pledged in 2014 has yet been built. Where is the new hope, and where are the new housing plans, from the wannabe Tory leaders?

Is it not clear, after nine years of Conservative government, eight Housing Ministers and four Secretaries of State, that the Conservatives still have no plan to fix the housing crisis, and is it not clear that the only hope for young people with regular incomes is a Labour Government with radical plans for discounted First Buy homes, first dibs for local people on new homes, and a programme for the building of a million new affordable homes both to rent and to buy?

James Brokenshire: I wondered, given the right hon. Gentleman's peroration, whether he was building up to Christmas, but I can say to him that a Labour Government are absolutely not that gift, because if we look at Labour's record in office we see house building fall to levels not seen since the 1920s. I would underline to him the work this Government have done: last year there were 222,000 new dwellings; only in one year in the last 31 have we

seen a higher number. So it is a bit rich of the right hon. Gentleman to make those points when, for example, Labour has opposed and voted against our stamp duty cut for first time buyers, which is absolutely about making the difference for young buyers. The Labour party opposed that measure, which underlines that it is the Conservative party that has the ideas, the innovation and the energy, whereas the Labour party, frankly, offers none of that at all.

Local Government Efficiency

2. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support efficiency across local government. [911352]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): This year we gave £20 million to the Local Government Association to fund council improvements, we introduced a programme to boost the use of digital technologies, and we are developing a tool to help councils improve efficiency. These measures will help councils continue their impressive work to manage budgets and deliver quality services.

Damien Moore: Does my right hon. Friend agree that councils should do their utmost to learn from best practice so that hard-working taxpayers are not burdened with bills, and that it is disgraceful that my local council, Labour-controlled Sefton, has wasted £32.5 million on a dilapidated shopping centre?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend rightly makes the point about Sefton, and councils should absolutely be focused on delivering good-quality services and value for money. That is why we are investing in areas such as digital innovation and looking at how that can drive further support. My hon. Friend is also right about ensuring that good practice is shared, and we are working with the LGA and others on that.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am sure the Secretary of State will accept that local government has had a 30% cut in spending since 2010 and also that councils have done incredibly well through efficiency savings and other measures to mitigate the worst impact of the cuts, but has he now seen the report by PwC for the County Councils Network saying that by 2025 there will be an £8 billion funding gap for councils? Does he accept that efficiency savings are not going to bridge that gap and that what we need now is an end to austerity and a major increase in funding for councils from the Government? Will he go to the Treasury and argue for that to happen?

James Brokenshire: I need no encouragement from the hon. Gentleman to make that case for local government and its power and ability to deliver good-quality local services. I recognise the challenge the hon. Gentleman brings to me in his question, but I highlight to him the real-terms increase in core spending power made available to councils this year. This Government have made that commitment to councils, but I absolutely want to be on the side of councils and commend them for their innovation and the work they do.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his answers thus far. May I commend to him a booklet published in 2011, with a forward by one of his notable predecessors, on efficiency in local government, which I had something to do with? May I suggest that no authority in the country has yet taken every single efficiency measure, and that we should roll that out right across the country?

James Brokenshire: I certainly look forward to perhaps continuing this discussion with my hon. Friend outside the Chamber, and I commend him for his work in rightly highlighting the issue of value for money. Of course we can and should do more, and it is important that where there is good practice we learn from that.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that 544 homes across Kent managed by East Kent Housing have not been regularly subjected to vital landlord gas safety assessments, and has he had conversations with the four local authorities, cash-strapped themselves, across the affected parts of Kent to make sure that this never happens again?

James Brokenshire: I am very willing to talk to the hon. Lady about the issue she highlights, and obviously safety for residents is an absolute priority concern for me and Members across the House, so if there are further details that she would like to share with me I would be very happy to pursue this on behalf of her and her constituents.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Conservative-controlled North West Leicestershire District Council has frozen its council tax for the past decade. Can the Secretary of State confirm that council tax in 93 English local authorities is lower in real terms this year than it was in 2010-11?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the great work of so many Conservative councils up and down the country, with their sense of value for money, delivering for local people and local services and ensuring that council tax is kept low. This is absolutely about getting those priorities right and delivering for local people.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): When the Secretary of State looks at those efficiencies, is he aware of the New Local Government Network's findings that a no-deal Brexit could contribute to an increase in demand for services to provide vulnerable people and families with support? Is he also aware that council grants in England from central Government have been reduced by nearly 50%, not to mention the £80 billion black hole in UK Government finances that a no-deal Brexit would leave? Will he and any future Prime Minister tell us how they will protect the most vulnerable in our society from a no-deal Brexit scenario, because they will certainly not be able to do it through efficiencies?

James Brokenshire: I appreciate that the hon. Lady is making her own point in her own way. Obviously, local government is devolved in Scotland, and she also makes her own point in relation to no deal. Preparations have been put in place and funding has been provided to a number of local councils in England, and we are ensuring

that the money designed for EU preparations actually gets to where it needs to go, whereas that has not always been the case with the Scottish Government.

Local Authorities: Government Funding

3. **Faisal Rashid** (Warrington South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of changes in the level of Government funding for local authorities on the adequacy of the services that they provide. [911353]

21. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of changes in the level of Government funding for local authorities on the adequacy of the services that they provide. [911374]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Our recent settlement confirmed an increase of £1.3 billion in resources for local government this year. This real-terms increase recognises the critical services that local government delivers. Core funding is nearly all un-ring-fenced, giving local government control over its local income and the freedom and flexibility to spend according to local needs.

Faisal Rashid: We know only too well by now that central Government underfunding of local authorities has devastated many of our constituents through cuts to many essential services. Perhaps the most dismal funding failure of all from this Government has been on housing, with the building of social housing at its lowest level since world war two. When will the Government wake up and realise that our housing is in crisis and at breaking point?

James Brokenshire: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that he has not recognised one of our biggest reforms in social housing, which has been to lift the housing revenue account borrowing cap. This will enable councils to borrow in order to build a new generation of council homes, and I want to see councils utilising and harnessing that so that we can build homes for people and ensure that councils play their part in that.

Vicky Foxcroft: Lewisham Council is fully committed to using the public health model to tackle youth violence, but since 2010, its budget has been cut by more than 60%. The Home Secretary says that the Government are also committed to that approach, but how does the Minister expect local authorities to put sufficient funding into schools, social services, housing and youth services when their budgets are being slashed?

James Brokenshire: I would highlight the fact that £261.2 million is being made available in Lewisham in 2019-20—a £7 million increase. The hon. Lady makes an important point about knife crime, and this is why we have targeted support through our troubled families programme, with around £9.8 million pounds being made available to actually get through to some of these issues with young people and to see that some of the work around families is accentuated. I am sure she will have an opportunity to make further points in the urgent question that will follow Question Time.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that in counties such as Shropshire, where our elderly population is growing at a disproportionate rate compared with the rest of the country, adult social care costs are going up very quickly? What steps is he going to take with the Treasury to ensure that more money is provided to enable rural shire counties such as Shropshire to deal adequately with adult social care costs?

James Brokenshire: I know that my hon. Friend will recognise the £650 million in additional funding that has been provided to local government for social care in 2019-20. He highlights some of the differentials around rural services, and as part of our fair funding review, we want to ensure that that is properly captured.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Social care needs both urgent funding and certainty from year to year, so that councils can rely upon funding packages such as those outlined by the Secretary of State. What can he do to assure us that rural councils will be properly accounted for in any business rates review?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend will no doubt be aware of some of the business rates retention pilots that are under way. They are a core element of our reforms. However, the whole concept of assurance for rural areas is part of our work through the fair funding review, and I appreciate the representations that he and others have made.

19. [911372] **Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): The local government funding settlement did nothing to tackle the crippling financial pressure on councils following eight years of austerity. Will the Secretary of State tell the House how he intends to respond to local authorities in 2019 when they have to choose between delivering children's services, delivering adult social care and emptying the bins?

James Brokenshire: This year's funding settlement offers local councils up and down the country a real-terms increase in core funding. Equally, the additional £650 million for social care is intended to address and respond to some of the issues around those services. However, she is right about the need for further reform in the longer term, and that is what we as a Government are determined to deliver.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): But back in the real world, 763 youth centres have closed, over 700 libraries have closed, Sure Start and early years services have been cut in half, and one in five children are now growing up in poverty. The legacy of this Government is a decade of neglect as local government takes the biggest hit at the altar of Tory austerity. So what is the Secretary of State most proud of: an entire sector at breaking point, or the increased inequality that his savage cuts have created?

James Brokenshire: There are now more children's centres than at any time prior to 2008, and quality has also improved. In 2010, 68% of early years providers were good or outstanding. Today, the proportion is 95%. As for outcomes, 52% of children left reception with a good level of development in 2013. Today, the proportion is 72%. I know that local government faces challenges, which is why I have argued the case for the settlement

that we have this year, but the picture painted by the hon. Gentleman is designed to inflame rather than to reflect the reforms made by this Government and the positive improvements that have been delivered.

Local Government Unitarisation: Northamptonshire

4. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment he has made of progress on the unitarisation of local government in Northamptonshire. [911354]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The Secretary of State recently announced his intention to implement the reorganisation plan submitted by the Northamptonshire councils. Subject to parliamentary approval, the new unitary authority will be in place in April 2021. I place on the record my thanks to the councils for their continuing constructive attitude towards ensuring that their residents will have better local government.

Tom Pursglove: I thank the Minister for that answer and share his sentiment about the local authorities' constructive work. What steps will his Department take to ensure that future decision making is at the heart of the new model and happens at the most local level possible, with strong area representation reflecting the different communities of north Northamptonshire?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of local decision making happening as close to people as possible. We expect new unitary authorities to support the creation of new parishes as part of this reorganisation, which has happened elsewhere, and we also encourage the formation of area committees to ensure strong local representation. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that local people must have a strong voice in the decisions that affect their communities.

Stronger Towns Fund: Scottish Towns

5. **Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): What plans the Government have to ensure that Scottish towns benefit from the stronger towns fund. [911356]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that the Government recently announced the stronger towns fund, which is part of a commitment to create growth and prosperity in all parts of our United Kingdom.

Stephen Kerr: When the stronger towns fund statement was made at the beginning of March, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said he would set out details on additional funding for Scotland and how it will benefit towns in Scotland. When will my constituents in Stirling see those details, and when will the fund be open for applications from Scotland?

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend's constituents are, of course, already benefiting from £45 million through the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal. We are working to ensure that the benefit of the stronger towns fund can be felt in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We are working with the devolved Administrations on the best way to achieve that, and we will release further details in due course.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We are still waiting for important details of the stronger towns fund. Whether it be in Scotland, England or Wales—all over the country—our towns have seen lower job growth than in our cities and have often been harder hit by austerity. We have lost sports centres, libraries, community centres and children's centres, as services have been shrunk back by austerity into the cities. We urgently need the details of the fund, because we need investment in jobs and public services in our towns.

Jake Berry: I am not sure I agree with the right hon. Lady that austerity is the reason for services being shrunk back into the cities. Successive Governments have failed to concentrate on creating growth in our towns across the United Kingdom, which is why we are working on the prospectus for the stronger towns fund. I hope to see exciting bids come forward, not least from her constituency, to see how we, as a Government, can back our northern towns and our towns elsewhere in England.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It speaks volumes that even the Scottish Tories are disappointed by the stronger towns fund, which represents a drop in the ocean compared with the estimated loss of €13 billion of European regional development fund money that towns, villages, cities and high streets will lose under the Tories' chaotic Brexit plans. Can the Minister guarantee that not a single penny will be lost to Scotland as a result of this chaos?

Jake Berry: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady has some sort of special insight. She seems to think that ERDF funding has already been lost. It is, of course, correct that the Government consult widely, not least with the devolved Administrations, on the future of the UK shared prosperity fund. It is absolutely right that we focus on delivering growth in every part of our United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Alison Thewliss: It is undeniable that money we would have got through ERDF funding will be lost on leaving the European Union, and this Government have no plans and no guarantees to replace that money. What is more, this Tory Government are intent on stringing Scotland along with promises of money—promises that, by their very nature, undermine the principles of devolution. Does the Minister not understand that, or does he just not care? He needs to show that he respects the Scotland Act 1998. If not, we move on.

Jake Berry: The hon. Lady says it is undeniable that money has already been lost.

Alison Thewliss *indicated assent.*

Jake Berry: That is not correct. If the hon. Lady has details, perhaps she will let me have them. We have been absolutely clear that we will respect all the devolution settlement as we move forward with the UK shared prosperity fund. But she does not have to wait, as we have already had 500 face-to-face engagements with stakeholders. I have engaged with all of England's metro mayors, and we continue to have discussions with the devolved Administrations. I would have thought that, as an SNP Member of Parliament, she had been told that by her colleagues up in Scotland.

Planning Applications: Economic Opportunities and Housing Need

6. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to ensure that planning applications (a) maximise economic opportunities and (b) tackle local housing needs. [911357]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The Secretary of State has issued a national planning policy framework that provides details on how economic opportunities should be included in applications that look to tackle local housing need.

Rachael Maskell: When a proposed economic development does not provide for sufficient good-quality jobs for our city, when proposed housing fails to address current and future need and when proposed car use only adds to an already gridlocked city, how will the Minister review planning so that ordinary residents have a real voice and so that councils and developers have to act on independent evidence to address local need, not their own interests?

Jake Berry: I believe the hon. Lady is referring to the planning application for the centre of York, on which she and I have met, and on which I have also met my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy).

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) is aware that the Secretary of State is currently considering this application, so it would not be right for me to comment. It is also right for me to say that I have formally recused myself from making a decision on the application because of my meetings with her and others.

Suella Braverman (Fareham) (Con): Planning applications that could deliver hundreds of new homes in Fareham are in limbo following advice from Natural England, which has instructed that planning permission should be refused unless developments are nitrate-neutral, after two rulings from the European Court of Justice. Will the Government work with me to look at suspending house building targets while affected councils work to find a solution to avoid being unfairly treated at potential appeals?

Jake Berry: We will happily work with my hon. Friend as she sets out. I believe that the housing Minister is already looking into this issue, and I am sure he will be in touch with her in due course.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): On Friday, I met a constituent who had been moved to temporary accommodation in Ilford, 17 miles from where her children attend school and where she works. The Government continue to place an unacceptable burden on councils, making them responsible for the lack of social housing while cutting their funding and refusing to increase their ability to build. Can the Secretary of State confirm that since 2010 the rise in homelessness has been caused by the cutting of council "Supporting People" budgets, the loss of more than 170,000 affordable council homes and a failure to stop soaring private rents?

Jake Berry: I do not accept there is the causal link to which the hon. Lady refers. Local authorities have an obligation, which they should discharge, to house homeless individuals and to provide good-quality accommodation. If she believes her local authority is failing to do that, perhaps she could provide details and we could look into that further.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will the Secretary of State revoke permission for Milford on Sea 1, in accordance with my written request?

Jake Berry: As my right hon. Friend is aware, the Department sits in a quasi-judicial position in relation to all planning applications. It would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment on the individual application to which he refers.

Mr Speaker: Yes, but there is nothing to stop the right hon. Gentleman depositing a copy of his written request in the Library of the House, for its collective delectation.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Minister acknowledge that one unintended consequence of extending permitted development rights to commercial and industrial property is that a significant amount of housing is now being generated that is below accepted space and safety standards? What action is he taking to correct that?

Jake Berry: I do not accept that, but I will say that we are looking at PDRs more generally. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman would, like me, celebrate the fact that this one policy alone has provided in excess of 40,000 houses for people to move into. We universally acknowledge, across this House, that we have a housing crisis and we need to build more homes, so I would have thought he welcomed that.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Many thousands of new homes are planned in Chelmsford, but pressure on our infrastructure holds back economic growth, and we especially need the second railway station for the city. Will my hon. Friend update us on the status of our housing infrastructure bid?

Jake Berry: My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for her constituents and really gets it: she understands that if we want to build the houses we need in this country, it is up to all of us, across this House, to get behind and support development. I know that she is in strong support of her housing infrastructure bid. The Department continues to review it and will give her the result of that review shortly.

Local Government Funding

7. **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the level of funding for local government. [911358]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (**Rishi Sunak**): The Secretary of State and I both meet our counterparts at the Treasury regularly. Future funding for local government

will, of course, be decided in the spending review, and the hon. Lady can rest assured that we will be making a robust case.

Mary Glendon: Since 2010, North Tyneside Council has lost £120-million worth of Government funding and, like many other councils, has had to cut frontline services to the marrow, not just to the bone. With the Chancellor admitting that he does not have a clue about the state of regional economies, can this House be confident that the Minister will make him fully aware of how bad things are for local councils?

Rishi Sunak: The Chancellor and my Department have already responded with an extra £1 billion to improve resources for local government. The hon. Lady may not believe me when I say that we are supporting local government, but perhaps she might listen to her own local authority. This weekend I glanced through the council's plan, which shows that inequality between the least and most affluent areas is narrowing, that according to feedback from residents 80% of local people are highly satisfied with where they live, and that an increased proportion of residents think their local area has improved.

Mr Speaker: We note the Minister's choice of weekend reading: the capital plan. I hope he found it stimulating or in some way therapeutic. I am sure we will hear his impressions on that matter in due course.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Given the importance of the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of spending through local government, will the Minister tell us when we will see the results of the successful bidders for the future high street fund?

Rishi Sunak: Successive rounds of bidding are currently in process. I can write to the hon. Lady with an exact date, if one is available from my hon. Friend the high streets Minister. More broadly, the hon. Lady is absolutely right about the need to measure the effectiveness of what local government does. In particular, the troubled families programme, with its extensive evaluation, provides great evidence to everyone in the House on the valuable early years prevention work that local councils do.

Mr Speaker: We all know that the Minister is an industrious fellow—I am sorry to dwell on this—but I sincerely hope that he was not reading the capital plan on Father's day. Surely not. I am sure he must have read it on Friday or Saturday, not on Sunday.

Licensing Act 2003: Communities and Local Planning Policy

8. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): If he will discuss with the Home Secretary the effect on (a) communities and (b) local planning policy of the operation of the Licensing Act 2003. [911359]

The Minister for Housing (**Kit Malthouse**): I am in daily receipt of advice from colleagues from across the Government—indeed, from across the House, local government and the nation—on the efficient and effective operation of the planning system.

Christian Matheson: Will the Government agree to change licensing laws to give local councils the authority to issue licences—for example, to events in their area—only if the applicant agrees to use recyclable or biodegradable plastics?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman, typically, raises an extremely important issue. As he will know, the proliferation of single-use plastics—or, indeed, the restriction thereof—is a matter for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We have made other progress, on top of the ban of microbeads, with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs having recently announced the ban on the distribution or sale of plastic straws and stirrers and plastic-stem cotton buds. The hon. Gentleman nevertheless raises an interesting point, particularly in respect of events, that we will ponder further.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): More and more licensed premises are being granted extended opening hours, even when it has hugely negative consequences for local residents. Councils report that trying to stop there being too many licensed premises in an area through the use of cumulative impact assessments is too slow, burdensome and costly, as well as being ineffective. Will the Minister agree to work with his colleagues to amend the Licensing Act 2003 to ensure that there is a much greater community voice in licensing and greater alignment with planning policy?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady addresses a significant issue that I had to address regularly in my previous life as deputy Mayor for policing in London. I recognise the impact that the proliferation of licensed premises in a particular area can have, not only on the community but on crime generally. It is incumbent on local authorities to have an authoritative and assertive licensing policy that sits alongside their local plan and planning policy, such that they can defend their policies in court or under judicial review, if that is the case. If the hon. Lady is concerned that that is not happening in particular authorities, I am more than happy to look into them and offer advice, where possible.

Bellwin Scheme: Social Care Packages for Vulnerable Children

9. **Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op):** What assessment he has made of the potential merits of extending the Bellwin scheme to include the exceptional costs of social care packages for vulnerable children. [911360]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): The Bellwin scheme can be used to compensate authorities for emergencies and disasters in their area. Children's services funding is made available through the settlement, with flexibility for councils to target their spending according to the local needs. In the autumn Budget, we were pleased to announce an extra £410 million to address the pressures on social care.

Luke Pollard: Plymouth City Council's children and social care budget is being sunk by a small number of exceptional care costs for some vulnerable young people,

with 6:1 care ratios costing £40,000 a week. Will the Minister agree to meet Plymouth City Council's Labour leader and Conservative leader of the opposition to look into how the Government can offer additional support for the rare but exceptional care costs for these vulnerable young people?

Jake Berry: I will of course meet the hon. Gentleman, the group leader and the council leader. I understand the hon. Gentleman has been active in this policy area, because he recently met my hon. Friend the Minister for Children and Families and the leader of Plymouth City Council, Tudor Evans. I thought he might raise this issue today, so I checked, and I understand that the Minister he met previously is going to write to him shortly to update him on the progress he is making with his campaign.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Over the past two years in Sandwell, my local authority, the number of children in care has increased by a third. Government funding has not kept pace and, as a result, the Children's Trust is faced with a deficit of £3.5 million. This is pretty representative, in common with local authorities up and down the country. What will the Minister do about it?

Jake Berry: The Government have their troubled families programme to tackle just the sorts of issues that the hon. Gentleman raises. No one in this House could be other than deeply concerned about the plight of our young people, particularly when they face the challenge of finding themselves in care, and that is why I am pleased that, since 2010, the amount the Government have spent on vulnerable children has increased by more than £1.5 billion.

Council Housing: Increasing Supply

12. **Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind):** What plans the Government have to increase the supply of council housing. [911364]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): We have given local authorities the tools that they need to increase the supply of council housing, abolished the housing revenue account borrowing cap, giving councils the freedom to borrow to build new homes, and provided a stable investment environment through a five-year rent deal from 2020.

Kelvin Hopkins: As vice-chair of Luton Borough Council's housing committee in the 1970s, I recall that we faced a crisis housing waiting list of 4,000 families, but with the support of the then Labour Government we built and bought thousands of council houses and housed everyone on the waiting list. Now Luton's Labour council has a crisis waiting list of 12,864 with no hope of housing them all, so will the Government stop cosyng up to the billionaires and speculators with promises of tax cuts for the rich and give councils such as Luton the powers and the massive resources they need to provide the millions of good council houses the country so desperately needs?

Mrs Wheeler: I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Gentleman has brought up that question, because, frankly, the answer is yes. We want councils to get on with building, which is why we have taken the cap off the housing revenue accounts. We expect at least 10,000 new council houses to be built, so I suggest that Luton gets on with it.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): For any type of housing—council housing or private housing—to be built, we need to look at changing the rules around land banking. The Minister is aware that, in a Westminster Hall debate last week, I raised the problems that we have with a particular developer in Hull who is storing up different areas of land and preventing them from being developed. Will the Minister please meet me to discuss this problem in more detail and look at what legislative tweaks can be made to prevent this from happening?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady, as ever, puts her case terribly well. The appropriate Minister would be delighted to meet her.

Mr Speaker: Very well done. I think that we will put that down as a win.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Crisis and the all-party group on ending homelessness recently appealed to Ministers to prioritise for housing survivors of domestic abuse, but is not it the truth that it is difficult to prioritise anyone because of the social housing crisis—a crisis acknowledged just a few minutes ago by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry)? Housing associations and local councils in particular have insufficient stock and limited capacity to build new ones to meet demand, and there are more than 1 million households on council waiting lists. Last year, just 6,500 social rented homes were built. That means that it will take 172 years for everyone on the current waiting lists to get a social rented home. Will the Minister please spell out exactly how she plans to sort out this crisis and offer our people some hope that they can also have a home of their own?

Mrs Wheeler: Again, I am absolutely delighted that the hon. Gentleman has asked that question, because we have actually put aside £9 billion for our affordable homes programme to deliver a quarter of a million affordable homes by 2022, including 12,500 for social rent. Let me repeat: we have given councils the ability to borrow against their housing revenue cap. We have taken the cap off. Please will councils get on with it? *[Interruption.]* As the hon. Gentleman is chuntering from the Front Bench, may I tell him that wonderful councils such as the ever present Conservative South Derbyshire District Council are doing exactly that?

Integrated Health and Social Care: Northamptonshire

13. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What progress his Department is making with the Department of Health and Social Care on establishing an integrated health and social care organisation in Northamptonshire. [911365]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): Following the meeting I had with my hon. Friend, we were pleased to facilitate meetings for the chief executives of the various councils and health bodies with officials from the Department of Health and Social Care and my Department. Those conversations have been very constructive, and I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the Social Care Minister and I would both be delighted to meet him and other MPs once the proposals have been fleshed out in detail.

Mr Hollobone: I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. There are still far too many patients in Kettering General Hospital and Northampton General Hospital who are classified as delayed transfers of care. They are mainly elderly patients whose medical treatment has been completed, but who face delays being put into the social care system. Does my hon. Friend agree that the reorganisation of local government in Northamptonshire presents a wonderful opportunity to create a social care and health pilot to combine these two services?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is spot on. Delayed transfers of care undermine patients' dignity while putting pressure on beds and costing the taxpayer money. Although we have seen fantastic progress nationally with delayed transfers of care halving since the peak, Northamptonshire is obviously not in that place. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the opportunity that greater integrated care could bring, and we are delighted to work with him and others to make that a reality.

Mr Speaker: I call Gordon Henderson. Not here.

Adult Social Care Funding

17. **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the funding for adult social care. [911370]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): The Government recognise the pressures faced by adult social services and have provided councils with an additional £10 billion in dedicated funding for adult social care in the three years leading up to 2019-20. Of course, the future level of funding will be settled in the spending review.

Bridget Phillipson: Councils are already struggling to meet the overwhelming demand and pressure to fund adult social care, to the extent that there will soon be little money left to pay for anything else. Demand is only going to increase and the need for reform is urgent, but after nine years of inertia can we ever expect this Government to get to grips with the growing crisis we face in adult social care?

Rishi Sunak: It is absolutely the case that the Government are gripping the pressures in social care—not only with £1 billion in extra funding at the recent Budget but, as we have recently heard, with greater integration of care between the NHS and social care. This is delivering real benefits on the ground, with a reduction in half of the delayed transfers of care showing enormous promise for what is possible in the future.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I am not quite sure where the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) was, but a number of Tory leadership contenders were queuing up on last night's TV debate to pledge their loyalty to adult social care and their desire to see it properly funded. Now that there is a queue of Conservatives who are finally waking up to the adult social care crisis facing this country, what assessment does the Minister make of the amount of money needed to plug the gap?

Rishi Sunak: We are doing that work with our colleagues in the Department of Health as we speak, to ensure an accurate reflection of the pressures as we go into the spending review. Those pressures are real; everyone acknowledges that there is an ageing demographic at the top end of social care, but working-age adults now account for half of the budget. It is right that we get the demographics right and that we go into the spending review with a robust case for the amount of funding that social care requires.

Mr Speaker: I call Clive Lewis. Not here—a second absentee. I hope these characters are not indisposed. We look forward to seeing them again ere long. The important point is that Yvonne Fovargue is here.

Weighting for Deprivation: Fair Funding Review

20. **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): Which local authority service areas will no longer be weighted for deprivation following the fair funding review. [911373]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Deprivation is an important driver of local authority costs, which is why we have proposed that it will be taken into account in four significant service areas, including adult and children's social care. Together, these account for up to two thirds of councils' total spending covered by the review.

Yvonne Fovargue: Will the Secretary of State agree to the Local Government Association's calls for the Government to publish more of the analysis that has informed the fair funding review proposals?

James Brokenshire: Obviously, work continues and we see the recommendations and representations that have been made. Population is by far the most important factor for more universal services covered by the foundation formula; deprivation was shown to have a small effect over and above this. We continue to keep the matter under review, and will share data as and when appropriate as part of that work.

Topical Questions

T1. [911376] **Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Last week, as communities celebrated Eid, we also reflected on those lives lost in the tragedy at Grenfell Tower. This House and other buildings were rightly illuminated in green

light as part of the commemorations. It is also right that we continue to take further steps to support the community of north Kensington and drive a culture change on building safety.

The serious fire at Barking last weekend was a reminder of the need for vigilance. I visited the community on Monday and have maintained contact with the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham, and with Bellway, the developer. I have asked the Building Research Establishment to investigate the fire and the independent expert panel to provide recommendations on any steps that may be required.

Finally, we remain very conscious of the impact of flooding in Lincolnshire and those whose homes have been affected. My Department's resilience and emergencies division remains in close contact with local agencies who are leading the response, as well as with colleagues in Whitehall.

Bridget Phillipson: I join the Secretary of State in his comments.

Rough sleeping is the very visible sign of the levels of suffering and failure that we see in our housing and social security systems. According to the Government's own figures, rough sleeping has increased by 165% since the end of the last Labour Government. Does the Secretary of State accept that this is just not good enough—that we need to do much more? What is he doing to tackle this scourge?

James Brokenshire: I do recognise the huge issue that the hon. Lady highlights in relation to rough sleeping. While the latest data on rough sleeping—the count last year—showed a small decrease, I know there is more that we need to do. That is why we have our £100 million rough sleeping strategy and work with our rough sleeping initiative in council areas. But her challenge to me is right. That is why I do keep this issue under careful review, and if there are further steps that we need to take, we will take them.

T4. [911379] **Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Noting that the right to buy has been abolished in Scotland, what efforts is my hon. Friend making to re-energise home ownership throughout the United Kingdom, particularly for first-time buyers?

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is very heartening to hear at least someone from Scotland standing up for aspiration and, in particular, home ownership. My hon. Friend is an example himself—a living embodiment—of the social mobility that home ownership can produce, and I congratulate him on his question. He is right that this Government have done quite a lot on home ownership, putting 542,000 people into home ownership who were not there in 2010, and through Help to Buy there is much more that we can do. I urge him to advertise north of the border that help to buy ISAs and lifetime ISAs are available across the whole of the UK, notwithstanding the barriers that are put in the way of home ownership in Scotland.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) amply warrants the panegyric that the Minister has just lobbed in his direction, so I hope he will not take offence when I say that at this sensitive time it might also be prudent to bear in mind that he is, in all likelihood, being lobbied.

T2. [911377] **Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): New research by housing association Habinteg reveals that outside London fewer than a quarter of new homes being built would be suitable for older and disabled people, and only 1% are accessible for wheelchair users. What will the Government do now to raise standards so that all new homes are accessible and adaptable for older and disabled people?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady makes a very powerful and important point about accessibility. Everyone should be able to access a home that is right for their needs. It is crucial that we understand how the changes to the building regulations on access introduced in 2015 are working on the ground. She refers to the Habinteg report, and we will look at that carefully as part of a review of those requirements. I am grateful to her for highlighting it to me.

T6. [911381] **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Residents in my constituency village of Burwash have raised concerns about the transparency of the planning appeal process—namely, that the developer seems to have access to information that perhaps residents do not. Does our excellent Housing Minister have any plans to reform the planning appeal process so that my constituents have more comfort and can be more involved in the process?

Kit Malthouse: Forgive the love-in, Mr Speaker, but my hon. Friend is a constant and persistent champion for his constituents in the many beautiful villages that he represents. He is quite right to identify an issue that a number of people have raised with me across the country—namely, the transparency of the Planning Inspectorate. That organisation is in the process of implementing the measures outlined in the Rosewell review in order for planning inquiries to provide more transparency. We are, at the moment, procuring a new online IT system—dread words in Government, I know, but nevertheless we are—that will allow progress of appeals to be tracked, providing exactly the sort of transparency that he is looking for.

T3. [911378] **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Since doing a constituency survey on leaseholds, I have been continually shocked by case after case of unfair charges and rises, such as sinking fund costs going from zero to £250 without any warning. I therefore welcome the Competition and Markets Authority's investigation into leaseholds, but what assurances can the Minister give to current leaseholders who face increasing costs? Will he put a moratorium on new leaseholds while the CMA does its work, to ensure that there are fewer victims?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady might be interested to know that there are fewer houses being built as leaseholds in England since the mid-1990s. The numbers have come right down, but she is right to highlight the work of the Competition and Markets Authority. As she knows, I called for the CMA to look into these abuses. There have been appalling examples, and she highlights some. We are determined to bear down on this. We have the new industry pledge, but I keep this under close review, given the issues that have been raised.

T8. [911383] **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What plans are there to continue to support Cornwall's unique culture and language?

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend for highlighting Cornwall, which I have a close affinity to, given that my family all come from there and my son was born there. I am very keen to see support for Cornish heritage, culture and language. We committed £100,000 to Cornwall Council over two years and continue to work with it to encourage the promotion of Cornish culture, which I know he will continue to champion, and I am pleased to support it on his behalf.

T5. [911380] **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): Council tax arrears are a growing problem. In 2018, an estimated 2.2 million households were in arrears, and in 2016-17, people paid an estimated £129 million in bailiff fees and court costs on top of the arrears. As part of the review into council tax collection, will the Minister commit to reviewing the Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992, to encourage councils to stop using liability orders and bailiffs?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting our review. I am happy to look at all things as part of that review, but she is right to highlight that issue. We are keen to see what we can do to improve the collection process, while maintaining high collection rates to fund the public services that we rely on.

Mr Speaker: I call Marcus Fysh. Where is the chappie? He was here earlier. He has beetled out of the Chamber prematurely, but he could have had another go.

T10. [911385] **Anne-Marie Trevelyan** (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Secretary of State update the House on what he and his Department are doing to ensure that every council is meeting its commitment to and obligations under the armed forces covenant?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point. I commend her for the work she has done to champion the military covenant, which every local authority has signed. The Minister for Defence People and Veterans and my Department have just written to councils, to encourage them to have a covenant champion. It is through such practical measures that we want to ensure that the covenant pledges are upheld.

T7. [911382] **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Given that waiting for the social care Green Paper makes Godot seem prompt, will the Minister agree to meet representatives of the Opposition parties, as well as leaders of the all-party Local Government Association, to use the LGA's excellent Green Paper as a starting point for fixing our broken social care system?

James Brokenshire: I continue to have discussions with the LGA and others to underline and champion the importance of sustainable local government finance and delivering good-quality social care. We also have discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care. It is right that we reform and challenge, and I will be taking that forward in terms of the spending review.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): North Lincolnshire Council recently refused a planning application for a housing development in the village of Goxhill, and North East Lincolnshire Council subsequently refused an application in the village of Waltham. Both were overturned on appeal. The reason for the councils' refusal was based on a lack of infrastructure, access to public services and the like. Will the Minister consider giving better guidance to inspectors, so that they take more notice of local opinion?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. He will understand that I cannot comment on specific planning applications, but he is right to identify that local communities often feel excluded from the planning process. The solution is for them to put in place a neighbourhood plan. The Government have pledged—and I have pledged, for however long I remain in this job—to strengthen neighbourhood plans, so that local people do not feel like victims of the planning system, but its master.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The Chair must always encourage new, young Members who are trying to develop their craft. I call Jack Dromey.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): In the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, the Government promised “Never again”. Two years on, not one penny has been forthcoming to help Birmingham City Council make safe 215 tower blocks, with 10,000 households. The Secretary of State quite rightly met private leaseholders before his recent announcement of the £200 million fund. Will he now meet council tenants from Birmingham? Birmingham MPs have asked that he do precisely that. It would be wrong not to hear their concerns, and they would regard it as a snub.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the points the hon. Gentleman has made on a number of issues in relation to Birmingham. We continue our discussions with Birmingham, at a whole host of different levels, on the services it is providing and some of the challenges it is dealing with. I will certainly continue to meet MPs from Birmingham and the west midlands, who have been convened in the past on some of these issues. I would be happy to discuss these issues further with them, and also in relation to the council tenants he refers to.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is one of the purposes of this Conservative and Unionist Government to strengthen the Union. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what his Department is doing to strengthen the Union?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a really powerful and important point on the issue of the Union, which I believe in hugely and passionately, and how we strengthen it and act on that. Through the UK shared prosperity fund, but also through the stronger towns fund, we do have the opportunity to ensure that all parts of our proud Union are playing their role in this country's prosperity and future, and that is something I and my Department are proud to challenge.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Government have provided some funding for the removal of aluminium composite material cladding, and they are testing non-ACM cladding on hundreds of buildings. The Minister for Housing has accepted that, if that cladding proves to be as dangerous as ACM cladding, it will have to be taken off. In that case, will the Government also agree to provide funding for the removal of non-ACM cladding?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the important point the hon. Gentleman the Chair of the Select Committee has highlighted on building safety. It is why I took the exceptional step of making £200 million available for remediation. It required a ministerial direction to be able to do so, because of its significance. Clearly, we have the ongoing testing of non-ACM materials. I will be advised by my team—the expert panel—in relation to the next steps, and I am clearly keeping the situation under careful review.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There is no point building thousands of new houses in greenfield areas unless we have the requisite infrastructure to go with them. A recent report shows that North Northamptonshire faces an infrastructure deficit of over £300 million in delivering the houses requested by central Government. What can the Department do to ensure that the infrastructure comes to North Northamptonshire?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right: one of the problems with housing development in the past in this country is that we have tended to build the houses first and cope with the infrastructure last. We have attempted to reverse that equation, and we now have £5.5 billion dedicated to housing infrastructure, which is specifically designed to release land to build the houses the next generation needs. I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss the possibility of a North Northamptonshire bid to the housing infrastructure fund either now or in the future.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When the Secretary of State meets the Chancellor to do the spending review, will he stress to the Chancellor that while a lot of money has been put into local government, it is inadequate to prevent the closure of libraries, or to cover issues such as social services and particularly youth clubs? Will he ensure that the Chancellor has a look at that and, more importantly, at social care in the community?

James Brokenshire: Through the last local government financial settlement, we increased the funding available to local councils for dealing with some of the issues of social care. If the hon. Gentleman is asking me to champion the needs of local government and to recognise the quality services it delivers, with the amazing work delivered by our councils up and down the country, I can assure him that I will absolutely be doing that.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The Department recently consulted on extra powers for local authorities and the police to deal with unauthorised encampments, a series of which we have had recently in Newport. Can Ministers update us on the progress being made so that our authorities have the powers they need?

James Brokenshire: As the hon. Lady will know, a number of those enforcement powers are led by the Home Office, and co-ordination between councils and the police is imperative. She will know that I laid a written statement on that a while back. Discussions continue with my ministerial colleagues, because I recognise the pressures. If there are specific examples that the hon. Lady would like to draw to my attention, I would be pleased to receive them.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Further to my last, if a decision could be expedited, the developer is now on the site, so any compensation will escalate.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer to my previous question.

Mr Speaker: Or even to his.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Many will have been surprised by the Secretary of State's complacent comments earlier about Sure Start centres. He will have seen the Action for Children report, which shows a 20% fall in usage, hitting the most vulnerable hardest. Does he understand that not only is that reprehensible, but that it costs us more in the long run?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman will have noted the figures I gave regarding the improved quality of a number of providers and, indeed, of children leaving reception with good levels of development. Obviously, local councils determine how they prioritise their resources, but it is important to look at the evidence.

Violent Crime

3.36 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on what the Government are doing to protect people from violent crime.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is with great sadness that I stand here today following events over the weekend, including a fatal stabbing in the constituency of the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), fatal stabbings in Tooting and West Ham, and a fatal shooting in Plumstead. Those incidents are subject to police investigations; arrests have been made in some cases, but I know that the House will understand that I cannot go into any more detail on those particular cases at this point.

These events are a stark reminder that serious violence is a continuing threat. There is no single or simple answer, and the police, local authorities, police and crime commissioners and others are working with us, taking action on a number of fronts, locally, regionally and nationally, in the immediate term and in the longer term.

In the immediate term, we continue to support the police response to serious violence. We have made it simpler for the police in those areas most affected to use section 60 no-suspicion stop-and-search powers. The new £100 million serious violence fund is already helping the police in those areas most affected: £65 million has now been allocated and work is under way to deliver the remaining £35 million to support the roll-out and expansion of violence reduction units.

As I think hon. Members acknowledge, however, the root causes of serious violence will take time to tackle. That is why we are focusing so strongly on prevention and early intervention, to stop our young people turning to violence in the first place. We are investing more than £220 million in projects under the youth endowment fund and our early intervention youth fund, and we have run a public consultation on a new legal duty to underpin the multi-agency, or public health, approach to tackling serious violence. We are reviewing the responses and will report as soon as possible.

We also continue to support police co-ordinated action under Operation Sceptre. The latest phase of the operation took place in March and saw almost 11,000 knives taken off the streets. Through our #knifefree media campaign, we have sent new lesson plans to 20,000 teachers in advance of the school summer holidays. Now that the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 has received Royal Assent, we will begin to bring its measures into force, including the piloting of knife crime prevention orders. As the House will know, following the Prime Minister's serious youth violence summit at the beginning of April, a new ministerial taskforce is driving action right across Government to renew our efforts in tackling serious violence.

We are working closely with police and crime commissioners, including the Mayor of London, the police and other partners to tackle violence and to save lives. We remain determined to protect the public and to stop more lives being taken, but Members will appreciate that there is no short cut to tackling serious violence.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the Minister for her response and I share her opening sentiments.

There have been four murders in London in four days, with two murders in my constituency in two weeks. I commend Tower Hamlets police for early arrests in both incidents. Londoners do not want to see politicians scoring points and/or playing party politics; they want answers and they want action. Clearly, police numbers have an impact—Tower Hamlets has lost 200 officers since 2010—but I accept that the Minister says recruitment is under way. We need those recruits on the frontline. What discussions has the Minister had with the Mayor of London and/or the Metropolitan Police Commissioner about the deployment of those new officers and on the impact of the number of police on our streets?

On powers, will the Minister advise on the Government's position on stop and search? She mentioned it, but the sensitivity of the bad old days of black and minority ethnic men and boys being disproportionately stopped should be prevented by the arrival of cameras for frontline officers. What has been the impact of the Government's proposal from the end of March to reduce the level of authorisation required from senior officer to inspector? Will the Minister advise whether section 60 is actually still needed and whether consideration has been given to restoring discretionary powers to frontline officers? Mayor Biggs and Tower Hamlets Council have invested £3 million to fund additional police officers. Will the Minister advise on what discussions she has had with Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government ministerial colleagues in respect of more support for the local authority, and on how the Home Office feeds into the London violence reduction unit, which is trying to replicate the success of the Glasgow violence reduction unit?

This situation cannot go on. President Trump's puerile intervention is not helpful. We need a more proactive and intelligent response. My constituents are anxious and they are frightened. They see low-level anti-social behaviour escalating to violent crime. We need a holistic approach to be advocated by the Government, the Minister, Mayor Khan and Mayor Biggs. The Government have control of the resources. I know it is not just about money, but it does help massively.

In conclusion, will the Minister advise on what representations the Home Office is making to the spending review to prevent more lives being lost? The police are working hard and they need our support, both moral and financial. Today, we all need to say clearly and bluntly that we join together in stopping this going any further.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his urgent question and for his attendance at the roundtable I hosted recently, along with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, to update the House on our efforts to tackle serious violence. If I may say so, I think the hon. Gentleman has got the tone right. Putting aside comments from overseas or elsewhere, the job of work is to tackle serious violence.

The hon. Gentleman mentions police resources. He will know that London has already set up a serious violence taskforce and a violence reduction unit. The taskforce has some 300 dedicated officers—I have been out on a raid with them—targeting the hotspot areas within London. The commissioner and others in the

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policing world are doing specific work across the country to identify and target hotspot areas. I hope the hon. Gentleman welcomed the announcement in the spring statement of a further £100 million to tackle serious violence. The Met is receiving about £20 million of that to support surge policing. As I say, announcements will be made imminently in relation to the outstanding money and the creation of violence reduction units, as well as those that have already been created.

We have seen a huge increase in stop and search across the Met and other policing areas. We analyse this very carefully, and I am pleased that at the most recent meeting that the Home Secretary held with chief constables, they all reported that levels of complaints about stop and search have dropped dramatically. Many of us understand that to be because of the use of body-worn cameras, which provide reassurance not only to officers, but importantly, to the public.

In terms of discussions with MHCLG, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have welcomed the recent announcement by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on the specific funding of knife crime projects.

On the spending review, we are working across Government to ensure that we have a cross-governmental spending review programme to help the children who are not just most at risk of serious violence, but have other forms of vulnerabilities, which, sadly, I have to deal with in my brief, including, for example, domestic abuse. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot go into the specifics of the spending review at the moment, but the fact that we have seen an increase this year of more than £1 billion, including the £100 million in the spring statement, and that we have the help of police and crime commissioners, is a firm statement of intention by the Home Secretary and the Government. I thank him again for his urgent question.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I was delighted to hear what my hon. Friend had to say about targeting hotspots. Does she agree that it is now clear that properly used and monitored stop and search is part of the answer, and will she confirm that the Government will continue along that line?

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for the experience that he brings to the House from his shadow portfolios over the years. We have always said that stop and search is a vital tool for law enforcement. We are all conscious in this House that a few years ago there was a real problem regarding the trust that certain parts of our society felt in relation to stop and search, and we wanted to try to reassure communities. That reassurance is now there, particularly with the introduction of body-worn cameras. Victims' families and others I speak to welcome the intelligence-led targeting of stop and search, as well as the section 60 search powers for moments when police action is necessary and needs to be immediate.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Another blood-stained weekend in the capital, and this morning four families will have woken up having lost a son, a brother or a father. The Minister is correct to say that there is no single answer, and we congratulate

the Met police on its work over this horrible weekend that we have endured, but does she accept that any strategy to combat rising crime must include hiring more police officers?

I note that the level of complaints about stop and search has dropped, which is very important. As the Minister intimates, that is to do with the use of body-worn cameras, because there is no question but that in the past, indiscriminate stop and search undermined communities' confidence in the police and therefore undermined the fight against crime.

In relation to the President of the United States implying that the Mayor of London is responsible for the rise in violent crime, the Mayor must be held to account like any other politician, but in 30 years in Parliament I have never heard a President of the United States reference a London Mayor at all. It is hard to escape the conclusion that President Trump may be singling out Sadiq Khan because he is of the Muslim faith. Does the Minister accept that if that were true, many people would find it distasteful?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome the fact that the right hon. Lady welcomes our action to ensure that stop and search has the trust of more people in communities. We see it as a vital tool within the portfolio of tools that police officers and others have. If she does not mind, I will decline to respond to the point about President Trump, for the simple reason that, as I know from the urgent question, we all have at the forefront of our minds today the four families who have been affected in the most terrible way this weekend. I hope she will forgive me if, today of all days, I do not dive into the political pool.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her openness in engaging with colleagues on this difficult issue, particularly the roundtable she held a short while ago. Will she confirm that she, her Department and her officials will remain open to a proper independent assessment of all the evidence on the root causes of this issue and will engage with the evidence with an open mind?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his participation in the recent roundtable. I can reassure colleagues across the House that hon. Members, particularly those representing the constituencies most affected by knife crime, will benefit from regular updates from the Home Office ministerial team. The roundtable was one example of that. We know that drugs and the gang culture around them are key drivers of serious violence—we have only to look at recent reports of what is allegedly happening in Liverpool—and one way we are attempting to tackle that is through the independent review of drug use in the 21st century led by Professor Dame Carol Black. We will consider the results carefully and, as he says, with an open mind.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing the urgent question. I cannot begin to comprehend the sense of loss experienced by those families who have lost loved ones to violence in recent days, and we too send our deepest condolences to all who are suffering. I agree with him that the totally wrong response is to tweet or retweet racist jibes about the Mayor of London.

As the Minister knows, my party fully supports a public health approach to stopping violence, which has delivered significant progress in Scotland and elsewhere, and that the SNP supports and has delivered on protecting police numbers. We support the Government's commitment to a public health approach, therefore, but when will we see an end to the significant cuts, particularly to local authority budgets, that have seen the safe spaces and key services crucial to such an approach decimated? While we also welcome the Home Secretary's recent personal commitment to repairing the dramatic loss in police numbers, does the Minister share our support?

Finally, the Home Affairs Select Committee has heard disturbing evidence from young people, particularly young black and minority ethnic people, about their very poor relationship with and lack of trust in the police in some parts of London. What will the Minister do to ensure that trust is rebuilt between young people and the police in all our communities?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is always a constructive and critical friend of the Government in this sphere. I will deal with his last point first. We have to reiterate to young people, particularly in the areas most affected by serious violence, that the police are on their side. I do not underestimate the complexity of this piece of work. It will take a great deal of time for the police to rebuild their relationships. Just a couple of weeks ago, I invited into the Home Office current and former gang members to listen to them myself and hear about their day-to-day lives, the challenges they face and their thoughts on how we can improve not just the rates of serious violence but their lives more generally. I have taken great inspiration from those conversations, as well as from my meetings with the families of victims from across the country. There are various plans in motion to assist with the public relationship between the police and young people in particular, and there is one in particular I want to focus on. I hope the hon. Gentleman does not mind if I do not go into detail at this very early stage, as I do not want to announce something before it has happened, but we are very conscious of the need to build relationships between the police and the people they are trying to protect.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): While there is a definite link between drugs, criminal gangs and knife crime, and while the police response must involve a surge in visible policing and discretionary stop and search, surely we must place greater emphasis on intelligence-led detective work to break up the criminal gangs, and on exemplary sentences for the gang leaders who are caught.

Victoria Atkins: There is an understandable tendency to focus on the law enforcement response and on our early prevention strategy, but an important part of this formula is the behaviour of serious organised crime gangs. These are the people who exploit our young people and children, these are the people who try to extend their drug markets across the country, and these are the people whom we absolutely must target if we are to bring an end to this. Along with the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), I have emphasised the need to target serious organised crime, including the profits that the criminals make from their disgraceful, disgusting business. I shall be

happy to discuss the issue with my hon. Friend in more detail after the urgent question, but I can assure him that tackling serious organised crime is an essential part of our overall efforts to target serious violence.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Yet more lives have been lost, more families are devastated, and there are disturbing reports of older gang members paying young people to stab, maim and kill. However, the letter that the Minister has just sent to the Home Affairs Committee suggests that the surge funding for policing is for only one year, which limits police forces' ability to recruit the officers they need, and also that the youth endowment fund will support only £6 million-worth of projects this year, which is a drop in the ocean compared with the scale of the cuts in youth services and interventions. Does the Minister not understand the real concern about the lack of grip, the lack of urgency, and the lack of scale in the Government's response? Can she really put her hand on her heart and say, in the light of this escalating violence, that the Home Office is doing enough?

Victoria Atkins: In the letter, we made it clear that while the spring statement included £100 million for police forces, the Home Secretary had committed himself to making resources for them an absolute priority in our spending review. In our conversations with chief constables who are either already setting up violence reduction units locally in, for instance, the west midlands, or are beginning to do so as a result of this announcement, we fully acknowledge that the funds cannot be just for a single year.

As for the youth endowment fund, we have locked in the money over 10 years, precisely because we have listened to local charities and those who work closely with young people. They say that it is often the short-term resourcing that is a problem, so we are investing £200 million, although it is expected to be more over the 10-year period. To demonstrate the urgency that we have ascribed to this issue, we have managed to move £200 million off the Government books in, I think, an almost unprecedentedly short time—a matter of a couple of months—which will seem pretty extraordinary to anyone who has not served in a Government Department. We have put the fund into an independent charitable trust, which is running it. The bids for the first round will close on 23 July, so if there are local charities that Members think should apply, I ask them please to press them into doing so. We expect the trust to make the first announcements of bids in the autumn.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Our current focus is obviously on the tragic events that took place in London over the weekend, but may I urge the Minister not to lose sight of the growing concerns of my constituents, from Barton in the north to Cleethorpes and the villages in the south? Thankfully, Humberside police numbers have been increased significantly and they do some excellent work, but they need continuing reassurance that resources will be made available to provincial forces such as theirs.

Victoria Atkins: It is always a pleasure to answer a question from my constituency neighbour. We might be separated by a constabulary boundary, but I absolutely understand the ripple effect of serious organised crime and of county lines gangs in areas such as ours. That is why one of our first actions to help those force areas that

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might not have the experience of gangland activity of some of our larger urban or metropolitan forces is the setting up of the national co-ordination centre on county lines, in order to help spread good practice. I am pleased to say that in just the few months it has been operating that centre has caused more than 1,000 arrests and the safeguarding of more than 1,300 vulnerable people.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Last night my community was violated yet again by a murder; it has been a terrible few years in West Ham, with nine young lives lost. The hon. Lady talks about money but we need proper funding. We do not need projects; we need police officers. We do not need overtime payments; we need something fundamental that raises the level of police activity. We are told that there are 1,000 county lines operations in this country. I want to be assured by the Minister today that there are 1,000 investigations into who is running those gangs and who are ultimately responsible for the murder, exploitation and enslavement of many young people in my constituency.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Lady has been a consistent advocate for her constituents, who have been so tragically affected by the rise of county lines. I remember a debate more than a year ago in Westminster Hall where she spoke passionately of the impact on mothers affected by serious violence and homicides in her constituency. The National Crime Agency has set county lines and the exploitation of children as a national threat; it is co-ordinating the national level operations because it has the national overview. That is where the national county lines co-ordination centre comes in, to help co-ordinate activities across force boundaries, because as the hon. Lady will acknowledge, these gangs do not respect constabulary boundaries. We have the extra funding—the £100 million serious violence fund that is going into London and other areas affected—and of course we have just over £1 billion of extra funding for policing nationally. The hon. Lady will know from the many conversations she and I have had about this issue that it is as much about early intervention and prevention as about law enforcement, and the £200 million youth endowment fund, alongside the early intervention youth fund which is already operating and helping up to 29 projects across the country, will help reach those children she cares so passionately about.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How can the anger of the public be assuaged when, notwithstanding the powers granted to the courts, they see continually repeat offences rewarded only with a suspended sentence?

Victoria Atkins: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. That has to be the focus of everyone with any influence in this area, including the judiciary. I am not going to comment or be drawn into observations about the judiciary, because of course I respect the independence of the judiciary, but I believe Members of Parliament can have an impact in publicising the terrible toll of knife crime on their constituencies, whether through possession or the use of knives, so that when judges and magistrates make decisions they have in mind the deterrent effect of their sentences as well as all the other factors that we would expect them to bear in mind.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The most recent serious act of violence in London took place three and a half hours ago in my constituency: it was a shooting in a perfectly quiet residential street. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said, we cannot go on like this; this has to be addressed. The police and council in my borough of Waltham Forest are throwing everything they can at this, including preventive strategies, but when struggling with seriously and profoundly constricted budgets it is very difficult for those preventive measures to have any real meaning. Will the Minister meet me and the leader of Waltham Forest Council, Clare Coghill, to talk about what the council and police are doing and what additional resources they need?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is a consistent campaigner for his constituency and of course I am happy to meet him. At the risk of volunteering the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), I should point out that he is also the Minister for London and he may be a good person to meet as well. We will certainly get a meeting arranged.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): As my hon. Friend will recall, I have frequently called on Ministers to bring to book the social media companies and ensure that they are doing everything they possibly can to ensure that this violence is not being encouraged through their social media channels. How is that dialogue going?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is consistent in his message to social media companies about their huge responsibility in hosting videos, pictures and so on on their platforms. This is an ongoing dialogue and, in fairness to the social media companies, we are seeing some progress, but it is not enough. That is why we have helped the Metropolitan police to set up its social media hub, to ensure that drill music videos in particular, which can often incite violence, are taken down as quickly as possible. Also, through the online harms White Paper, we are advocating the idea of companies having a duty of care of towards the wider public.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): We all agree that early intervention and prevention are part of the public health approach, but I sometimes worry that when we use that language, we are not actually following it through. Cross-departmental working is at the heart of the public health approach, so can the Minister update us on how that is going in relation to education, mental health, youth work, early intervention—Sure Start, for example—and the police? Also, has she done any work on pooled budgets, to ensure that the money follows the issue and that we do not simply have everybody fighting over their own departmental budgets?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. On the work that is ongoing across the Government, she will know about the Prime Minister's serious youth violence summit, the purpose of which was to drive action across the Government. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that the Department for Education has a huge role to play, as does the NHS and others. Indeed, only last week I visited an alternative provision school to see for myself the work being done on the ground to

help young people who are at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of serious violence. On the actions arising out of the summit, there is now a specific ministerial group attended by all the relevant Secretaries of State, as well as a unit within the Cabinet Office, to drive this work forward, so it really is at the centre of Government.

On the question of spending priorities, spending review discussions are ongoing and it will not surprise the hon. Lady to know that I have been emphasising the need for us to help vulnerable people—particularly those who might have been subject to adverse childhood experiences—at an early stage in life. That has huge benefits both for the way in which society enjoys itself and for the Home Office and its partners not having to pick up the pieces.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Yet more lives have been taken too early, and yet more families have been left to mourn their loss. Of course the police need resources, but they also need powers. In this instance, knife crime prevention orders are a power that the police and the Mayor of London have asked for. May I ask the Minister when we will be in a position to see these orders rolled out, in the hope that the entire House will give them the chance to succeed?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend is a consistent advocate not just for his constituency but for the young people he has helped to escape a life of crime in the past. He asks about knife crime prevention orders. The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 has recently received Royal Assent, and we are aiming to introduce the secondary legislation that we need to alter to enable the piloting of these orders as soon as possible. We are intending to do this in the autumn. The police asked for these preventive powers, and through the Offensive Weapons Act, we have been able to deliver them.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the London Borough of Newham's recent decision to appoint 30 additional youth workers? Does she recognise that drastic cuts in youth service funding since 2010 have made the current problems worse?

Victoria Atkins: I genuinely thank the right hon. Gentleman for all that he does on this issue. It is a particular issue in his constituency, and I respect his work. I welcome that announcement about youth workers. The way in which youth services have been funded is, of course, a point of tension between the Government and the Opposition, but if the London Borough of Newham has been able to find the resources to invest in that, and if it thinks that that is the best way of spending that money, that is the sort of local approach that we fully support. I wish those youth workers the very best in their work in his constituency.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The recent murders in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) have sent shockwaves through our borough. Knife crime in Tower Hamlets has increased by 34% over the past eight years. We are having to come to the House week in, week out to ask the Government to intervene, to provide more policing, more youth facilities and more services, to protect people, to prevent crime, and to prevent the needless loss of lives. Does the Minister agree that this crisis is a national emergency? Although she has been

put up to defend the Government and to explain the situation, this is not good enough. The Government must take serious action and invest serious amounts of money to tackle this problem, or we will sadly be back here again next week and the week after to raise these issues. Things cannot go on like this.

Victoria Atkins: I respectfully remind the hon. Lady that if she reads the serious violence strategy, she will see the key drivers of serious violence that have been identified by my excellent Home Office officials. Looking at the evidence, she will also be reminded of the fact that those drivers include drugs, and she will know of our international work to draw together colleagues from across the world to share intelligence and operational best practice as to how to tackle serious violence. For example, at the Prime Minister's knife crime summit we heard from an eminent professor from Chicago about how violence in the home is a high indicator that someone will be either a victim or a perpetrator of violence on the streets. That is why, for example, the domestic abuse Bill, the introduction of which I hope the whole House supports, is a key piece of work. Although I absolutely hear and understand representations about resources, we cannot just look at this as a resources issue. We must look at the wider key drivers of crime, which include drugs and violence in the home.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May I say to the Minister that anyone watching this session will be looking on with a sense of incredulity? Where is the passion, the indignation, and the horror about what is happening on our streets, not just in London but across the country? Violent crime is soaring and has been for months. Members across the House have raised the matter with the Government, but all we get is, "A million here, and a million there," which is peanuts given the problems we face. This is a national emergency! Cobra should meet, and the Government should bring the same urgency and dynamism to the situation that they would bring if there had been—God forbid—a terrorist attack. It is about time that the Minister got a grip on the situation. For that matter, where is the Home Secretary? I have raised this matter again and again. He is absent without leave, busy fighting for the Tory leadership when he should be here doing his day job.

Victoria Atkins: This is not about my tone or the hon. Gentleman's tone; it is about action to help the families most affected by serious violence. I, for one, think there is a little too much anger in politics at the moment. Anger is not going to solve the problems of serious violence. It is our expectation that all our partners across the country will work together to address this, particularly through the new public health duty on which we recently consulted. It is by working together, and not through shouting and banging tables, that we will make progress.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Why does the Minister think we are still seeing an escalation in violent crime? She has read out a list of measures and projects that the Government are implementing, so why are we not seeing results?

Victoria Atkins: I am always very careful with statistics, because I am conscious that any use of statistics involves a family's son, daughter, brother or sister, but I ask the hon. Lady to look at the Metropolitan police's most recent statistics on knife crime in the city.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I recommend to the Minister the youth violence intervention programme run by Redthread, which sees trained youth workers embedded in A&E departments at certain hospitals in Birmingham, Nottingham and elsewhere to intervene and win the confidence of young victims of violent crime at a time that can make a real difference in breaking the cycle of their involvement in violent crime. It is a great project, but what assurance can she give me that such projects will receive the sustainable funding they need so that they can be rolled out into every A&E department in the country?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the work of Redthread. The Home Office is investing in Redthread's projects in Nottingham, Birmingham and London hospitals, and I have seen its work at close hand. I am very impressed by what Redthread does.

We will, of course, look at rolling out the project further, but I hesitate because some A&E departments thankfully do not see the levels of knife crime that perhaps London, Nottingham and Birmingham do. We have invested in those hospitals because we are targeting funding at hotspot areas, but we will look at where the project could assist by being rolled out further.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister should not selectively use statistics. Violent crime is significantly up, and we warned the Government when they were cutting police numbers that it would have an impact on crime. We were told that it is not about numbers but about the effective use of our police forces. She must now regret cutting 20,000 police officers, which must have an impact on what we are discussing today. What we want to hear from the Government is not about projects but about how much they will put into the police and how many of the police officers we have lost will be replaced.

Victoria Atkins: I am not selectively using statistics. I referred the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) to the Metropolitan police statistics precisely because of the action that the commissioner has taken in London, including setting up the serious violence taskforce, which, as I said earlier, dedicates 300 officers to hotspot policing across the capital. The commissioner has said that the recent figures show a decline in the increase, which is what I was talking about. It was not selective at all. I am just looking at the most recent evidence we have.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I inform the Minister that Opposition Members do not feel anger but passion, upset and worry about the numbers of young people affected, including those who have lost their life in my constituency, and about the apparent lack of urgency from this Government in addressing what is a national crisis. We saw many lives taken in London this weekend, and I was at a knife crime forum in my constituency on Friday to meet families, stakeholders and constituents who are worried and angry about the lack of action by this Government.

Is it not now time for the Government to take this seriously and recognise that when they cut funding for the police, for education and for youth services, it means we no longer have enough youth workers to work with

our young people? Will she finally take note and make a significant investment in youth services so that our young people have a future and a hope?

Victoria Atkins: Action we have taken in the past 12 months includes: the serious violence taskforce, chaired by the Home Secretary and attended by the Mayor of London; the ministerial taskforce, chaired by the Prime Minister, to drive cross-governmental action; the establishment of the national county lines co-ordination centre, which has seen more than 1,000 arrests and more than 1,300 people safeguarded; the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, which is tightening the law on knives, acids and firearms, including through knife crime prevention orders; Operation Sceptre, which has been rolled out by police forces in weeks of action, the most recent of which saw nearly 11,000 knives taken off the streets; the anti-knife crime community fund, which funds small local projects—68 of them last year; the £22 million early intervention youth fund, funding 29 projects across the country; the #knifefree national media campaign, which has had more than 6 million views and 20,000 teachers receiving lesson plans in June; investing in Redthread intervention work in A&E departments in London, Birmingham and Nottingham; setting up the £200 million youth endowment fund; closing the public health duty consultation at the end of this month—and we are responding as quickly as we can; setting up an independent review on drugs; commissioning and receiving voluntary commitments from major retailers to prevent the under-age sale of knives in stores and online; giving more than £1 billion extra to the police this year, including £100 million from the serious violence and with the help of police and crime commissioners; making it easier for officers to use section 60 stop-and-search powers; investing £96 million to support victims and witnesses, through the Ministry of Justice; and supporting a new national police capability to tackle gang-related activity on social media.

That shows the complexity and range of the actions we are taking. I hope the hon. Lady is asking the same question of the Mayor of London, because we all bear a responsibility—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady laughs as I say this and does some funny actions. I do not know why she is taking this in such a light-hearted fashion. This is deeply serious. This is the commitment of the Government and our local partners, and we all should really be working together to stop this violence.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Whether we are talking about police officers required to tackle county lines from Liverpool to north Wales and Cheshire, or police officers needed to tackle the issues that my colleagues have mentioned in London, it must be clear to the Minister that there are not sufficient numbers of police on the streets. The Home Secretary himself, in his leadership bid, has said that we require 20,000 more police officers. Will the Minister tell us when she intends to secure additional officers? I am talking not just about through the spending review, but now.

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that PCCs across the country are recruiting up to 3,000 new officers as a result of the new settlement that we—[*Interruption.*] My right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service reminds me that Labour Members voted against this new settlement. As I was saying, this is as a result of the £1 billion extra we are investing in policing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her measured response. The violence over the weekend continues to cause great concern. Does she agree that to combat the violence there is a need for a joint strategy, both nationally and locally? Nationally this should be done through Government policy resourcing and funding, and locally it should be done alongside chief constables, with community policing. Together, they can address the crime, reduce the violence, restore confidence among the general public and make the streets a safer place to walk again.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and he is absolutely right to say that efforts to tackle serious violence must be driven at the national, regional and local level. Efforts that will work in one part of the country may not work in another. That is precisely why when the Home Secretary has been meeting chief constables to discuss best operational practice we have been very careful to respect the fact that not only will the police tell us what powers they need—this is precisely why we introduced knife crime prevention orders, through the Offensive Weapons Act—but they will need operational independence to ensure that what they do locally is what they believe will best fit their local area.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Minister has clearly outlined interventions and a list of preventions that the Government are seeking to administer, but what is she doing to support young people exiting crime? To what extent does she believe that discrimination and socioeconomic factors in particular affect care leavers, black young people and white working-class young people, and their ability to get ahead in life?

Victoria Atkins: On the hon. Lady's last point, in my meetings with former and current gang members, as well as with youth workers, I am struck by the fact that certain groups in a generation of young people find it particularly difficult to access opportunities. That is why one thing I am looking into is the development of opportunities for young people in the areas most affected by serious violence. If we are to steer young people and children away from a life of crime, we have to ensure that they have opportunities beyond that. There is, for example, a big role for large companies, which could help to invest in or set up traineeships and so on in hotspot areas, as part of their overall corporate social responsibility.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I could forgive any Minister for being overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of this problem, but surely this is not a time for more projects, for consultation and for taking refuge in strategy while blood flows unhindered down our city streets. Last week, the A&E consultant at my local hospital said to me that the damage done by knives is in their pointed tip. If more knives had curved ends instead of sharp points, we would reduce deaths through knife crimes by 90%. Will Minister consider that? It is a practical, realistic option that we could undertake here and now. Will she discuss it with manufacturers, importers and retailers? There is no reason why a knife should have a point: we can slice, dice, cut and shape with a curved-edge knife. It would save lives. It is a small, practical thing, but honestly it could be a lifesaver.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his suggestion. We have previously looked into the idea. As we discussed during consideration of the Offensive Weapons Bill, there is a balancing act to strike between kitchen knives having a legitimate use—we all have sharp-pointed knives in our kitchens—and the real harm that these objects can cause if they fall into the wrong hands or are taken out of the kitchen or the home. Thus far, we have concluded that changing the design of knives would not assist, but I am always very open to looking into the idea. I will continue to review the evidence, but we felt that for the moment there were better ways to achieve the balancing act between the legitimate and illegitimate use of kitchen knives. Of course, helping mums, dads and carers to understand that if they are worried about their child, there are places they can go to seek help, particularly through the #knifefree campaign, may be one way for parents to understand how they can control what happens to the knives in their kitchen drawers.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does the Minister not understand that we are reaping the whirlwind—that £1 billion has been taken out of the Met budget and we are being asked to be grateful for the small amount we are now getting back—and that youth services have been decimated, including in my own borough, where all funding was removed and we lost two thirds of all early-prevention services? Even Westminster City Council is now beginning to recognise, years later, the need to give something back. It is simply not good enough to read out a list of initiatives that are now expected to come into place. We do not want anger from the Minister; we want urgency.

Victoria Atkins: I am a little confused, because earlier the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) urged me to be angry. I am sorry that the hon. Lady takes issue with that. I am not angry at all, in that this has always been my approach. I have prosecuted serious organised crime and I have seen the terrible aftermath of these gangs through my work in the criminal justice system. This requires a methodical, cool-headed analysis of the evidence. The reason I read out the list was to give a flavour to the House of the range of activities that is happening on a national and local basis to tackle knife crime. Of course, there is so much more that local authorities are doing, as we have heard from hon. Members already, but, to my mind, this is about a methodical and hard-headed approach to looking at the evidence to see what works. That is precisely why I assume that she will welcome the emphasis we are putting on the evaluation of the various charitable projects that will be funded through the Youth Endowment Fund. We have made that an absolute requirement of the way in which the fund is run, so that we can discover what works and what does not work and invest in those projects that do.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I impress on the Minister the feeling that an Opposition Back-Bench MP has when attending a vigil of thousands of young people and are somehow made to feel responsible for the loss of a loved one? There is this utter sense of helplessness when you have had Backbench debates, when you have had a one-to-one with the Secretary of State—who by the way is not in his place today on this most important of topics—and

[Catherine West]

when you have had a one-to-one with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to talk about early intervention. You have ticked every box: you have had the community meeting; you have had the listening meeting; and then you get the reply. This is after you have been to the vigil and held in your arms the mother who is crying, and the sister of the young man who was stabbed. The mother says, “Dear Catherine, my youngest son has been mugged twice in three months. What are you doing about it?” We feel the frustration, the anger and the tragedy of it. Please, we must do something much more than just put in place programmes and strategies. We must look at the £1 billion taken away and the £1 million being given back. It just does not add up.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I know that constituency colleagues—constituency MPs—will be at the forefront of having to deal with the effects not just of the immediate family of those affected, but of the wider community. I do understand that. It is why I always say that the most important part of my role is meeting the families of victims. It seems to me that every time we meet across the House and every time we meet the victims, we learn more about the complexity of the causes and what we can do to help. I personally have benefited from the meetings that I have had in informing our work.

Resourcing is an issue that Opposition Members raise continuously, and I understand why, but we cannot escape the fact that the key driver of serious violence is the drugs market, and it is the serious organised crime gangs that are driving this. That is why our national efforts through the National Crime Agency are so critical.

The hon. Lady will also welcome the fact that the Mayor of London has set up the serious violence taskforce with the 300 dedicated officers who will go to hotspot areas. If there are issues with operational matters on the ground, I please ask her to raise them with him, because just as I benefit from hearing from colleagues across the House, I am sure that he too benefits from hearing from constituency MPs.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Here we are again after a weekend of shocking violence. My heart goes out to the families, friends and communities affected by these tragedies. Clearly, we must do better. What has clearly echoed across the Chamber is that this is about prevention. In her statement, the Minister mentioned the public health approach. Does she agree that we need a lot more training for the trauma-informed intervention in education, in healthcare, in prisons, in the police and in youth services?

Victoria Atkins: I think that that is right. Let me give an example of some of the actions that have not been mentioned today already. We are acting ahead of the response to the public health consultation with a rolling programme of engagement events for all relevant agencies and bodies, the police and so on across the country to help them understand how they can share data better. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) mentioned speaking to an A&E consultant. Sharing that data on an anonymised basis can help the police to target streets, areas and wards that may have a particular

problem or be a hotspot. We are very much acting on the basis of spreading advice and best practice across the country, before looking at what further steps we need to take regarding the public health duty that we have consulted on.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): In the answers today—and in the absence of the Home Secretary—the Government look aloof and simply as though they are not taking a national crisis seriously enough. Why is the Home Office still withholding tens of millions of pounds from the Met that its own advisers on the English Cities Fund said London requires for major demonstrations, sports events and visits of foreign dignitaries? When will that money come through to fund the extra thousands of police officers that London desperately needs?

Victoria Atkins: I have the advantage of my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister next to me, who informs me that the Met has already received emergency grants in that regard. I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the details of those emergency grants.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The west midlands is just as important as London, and over the last 10 years we have lost about 3,000 policemen. Logically, we cannot expect the same level of service; crime will go up. Over the last weeks in Coventry specifically, there have been stabbings—one fatal and one very serious. The police in Coventry are firefighting, and I have raised this issue many times. It is no good the Minister going through a list of all sorts of initiatives. The Government have to reassure the people out there because that is their duty, and the only way they are going to reassure people is with adequate policing. It is fundamental for the Government to protect their people, but they are not doing that at the moment.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to learn that his chief constable is one of the chief constables the Home Secretary meets regularly to discuss their approach to serious violence. West Midlands police is also one of the forces receiving extra money for surge policing through the £100 million spring statement money. I am pleased that the chief constable is setting up his own violence reduction unit; when I say “his own”, I mean that he is leading that work in the west midlands. We expect to see the results of that unit soon.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Last week we brought to Parliament the concerns of the 100-year-old community of Slade Road—a once fine community with Victorian houses and people who have lived in them for successive generations that is now wracked with crime. Fear stalks the streets and local people are angry about what has happened to the community in which they were born and brought up. Is the Minister seriously suggesting that there is no link whatever between the loss of 2,100 police officers in the west midlands—and 21,000 nationwide—and rapidly rising crime? Will she agree to meet local residents, the police, the local authority and me to discuss an action plan to restore peace to the streets of Slade Road?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman brought to life in this Chamber the impact of antisocial behaviour and crime on Slade Road in his constituency in his Adjournment

debate last week. At the risk of repeating my answer to the previous question, the chief constable of West Midlands police is one of the chiefs that the Home Secretary meets regularly to share best practice and to hold to account for serious violence in their local areas. The chief constable is in the process of setting up the violence reduction unit in the west midlands, and we expect to see the results of that unit very soon. The hon. Gentleman will also know that West Mids is one of the constabularies that has received money through the extra £100 million in the spring statement. I would, of course, be delighted to meet him and his constituents.

Listeria: Contaminated Sandwiches

4.39 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the listeria outbreak related to contaminated sandwiches in hospital trusts.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I would like to update the House on the actions the Government are taking to protect the public following cases of listeria in hospitals linked to contaminated food. The NHS has identified nine confirmed cases of listeria in seven different hospitals between 14 April and 28 May this year, all linked to contaminated sandwiches from a single supplier. All the known cases involve in-patients. Very sadly, five people have died. I would like to express my condolences to the families of those who have lost a loved one. I promise that there will be a full and thorough investigation, with severe consequences if there is any evidence of wrongdoing.

Lab testing indicated a link between two cases in Manchester Royal Infirmary and one case in Liverpool. Contaminated sandwiches were identified as the likely cause by Public Health England. The manufacturer—The Good Food Chain—and its supplier, North Country Cooked Meats, have withdrawn the sandwiches, and voluntarily ceased supply of all products on 7 June. They are both complying with the Food Standards Agency on a full product withdrawal. The other cases have been identified at these hospitals: Royal Derby, Worthing, William Harvey in Ashford, Wexham Park, Leicester Royal Infirmary, and St Richards in Chichester.

The risk to the public is very low, but any patients or members of the public with concerns should contact NHS 111 or, of course, 999 if they experience severe symptoms. Listeria infection in healthy people may cause mild illness but is rarely fatal. However, for certain groups it can be much more serious, as we have tragically seen. The NHS, Public Health England and the Food Standards Agency have acted swiftly to identify, contain and investigate the cause of this listeria outbreak. These deaths should never have happened. People rightly expect to be safe and looked after in hospitals, and we must ensure that we take the necessary steps to restore that trust that the public deserve to be able to hold.

This is not just about ensuring that the food we serve in hospitals is safe—the NHS served 140 million main meals to in-patients last year—but, importantly, is also about ensuring that food given to patients is healthy, nutritious, and aids their recovery. So I can inform the House that we are launching a root-and-branch review of all the food in our hospitals—both the food served and the food sold. The Government will work with the NHS to build on progress in three vital areas. First, there is eliminating junk food from hospitals. Since the introduction of the NHS action on sugar scheme, we have halved the sale of high-sugar soft drinks, and trusts are taking action to remove unhealthy food and drink items and replace them with healthier alternatives. After all, hospitals are places for good health. Secondly, on improving nutrition, new national standards for all healthcare food will be published this year. All patient menus will have to ensure that minimum patient nutrition

[*Matt Hancock*]

standards are met. Thirdly, on healthier choices, we will work closely with the Hospital Caterers Association and others to ensure that healthier food choices are available across the NHS.

The review will identify where we need to do more, where we need to do better to improve the quality of food in our hospitals, and how we help people to make healthier choices. I know that this is an issue that many colleagues in the House feel strongly about, as do the public. We will do everything we can to ensure that the food we eat in hospitals is both safe and healthy.

Jonathan Ashworth: Let me say at the outset that despite our often sharp political differences across the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State has my commiserations over his entirely noble ambition to want to be the Prime Minister of this country—but perhaps, given Brexit, he has had a lucky escape.

Moving on to the substance of what we have to discuss today, our thoughts really must be with the families of those who have lost their lives. This is, first and foremost, an issue of patient safety and standards of care. Every patient deserves the very safest possible care and absolute confidence about the quality and safety of the food that they are offered. I am pleased that there is an investigation, and I welcome what he said about serious consequences if wrongdoing is found. I am also pleased that he talked about a root-and-branch review, which we have been calling for. As I understand it, NHS Improvement was already reviewing the hospital food plan, which was delayed from April. Is this a new review or an existing review that now has new obligations? Can he explain to the House how the review he has announced interacts with the existing NHS Improvement review?

I know that the investigation will want to get to the bottom of what went wrong and why, and it will no doubt make recommendations for the future, but we would be grateful if the Secretary of State offered some clarification. The first case showing symptoms of listeria was on 25 April, and sandwiches and salads were withdrawn on 25 May. When were Ministers informed, and what action was taken?

I am grateful that the Secretary of State listed the other hospital trusts affected, which include the one in my Leicester constituency. As I understand it, the Good Food Chain was supplying sandwiches to 43 trusts. Can he tell us the status of investigations or what investigations have gone on in the other trusts that he has not listed today? Does he expect cases to emerge in more trusts, and what action is currently under way to contain the spread?

What advice has the Secretary of State received from officials that microbiological controls for listeria need to be improved with respect to pre-packaged sandwiches? Will he consider introducing mandatory testing on all batches of high-risk food? Of course, this is not the first time that there has been a listeria outbreak. There was an outbreak back in 2016, and in response, the Food Standards Agency investigated and issued a report warning Ministers of the dangers posed by pre-packed sandwiches. Can he outline what measures were taken by Ministers in response to that report in 2016?

I have been speaking to hospital catering staff in recent days, and they raised concerns that tight finances and years of capital cuts have left kitchens substandard, which has driven a move to greater outsourcing of catering, with sandwiches and soups steadily replacing hot meals. Recent data show some hospitals spending less than £3 per patient per day. Does the Secretary of State agree that the review he has announced today should be backed up by investment in hospital catering facilities and legally backed, clear minimum-quality standards for hospital food? Healthcare is not just about medicine, surgery, bandages and procedures; it is about nutrition and hydration too. Patients will need urgent reassurance. Can he provide that today?

Matt Hancock: The shadow Secretary of State raises important questions, and I will try to address them all. Ultimately, I strongly agree with him that this is about standards of care. People deserve to be able to trust that the food they eat and are given in hospital is safe and, indeed, nutritious and good for their health—that is an important part of this too. Clearly, the most acute aspect of what we are discussing is safety and the lack of listeria in food, but it is part of a much bigger picture, which is why we are having a root-and-branch review.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the hospital food plan, which NHS Improvement has been leading. The review will be wider than, but will encompass, some of the existing work that is ongoing. It is about not only how food is procured by hospitals, but the quality of food. Work on the national standards in hospital food is important. It has been ongoing for several years and will come to fruition very soon. More broadly, dozens of hospital trusts have brought their catering in-house and found that they get better quality food that is more likely to be locally produced and is better value for money. We will be examining that model closely, because I am very attracted to it, and it has the potential to reduce the risk of safety concerns such as this.

The hon. Gentleman asked about timings. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), was made aware of this outbreak on 4 June. I was informed on 6 June, and we published the details of the outbreak on 7 June.

Before that, Public Health England very swiftly identified that there was a link between these particular listeria outbreaks. It is only because of recent advances in genomic medicine and testing that we could work out—that Public Health England could work out—that the outbreak in Liverpool and the outbreak in Manchester were connected, and therefore identify that the source was outside those hospitals, rather than inside the hospitals, and that is what then identified that this was from the food source. The truth is that there are just over 150 listeria cases a year. It is a notifiable disease, so we are confident that we are properly notified of the various cases. Frankly, it was cutting-edge work by Public Health England that allowed us to connect these different cases and work out that a single source was causing these deaths.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the 43 trusts that we know bought from the Good Food Chain. We have of course been in contact with all hospital trusts, whether or not they bought from this individual company, to try

to make sure that we have confidence in their supplies. The Good Food Chain has confirmed that it has followed advice and has disposed of all products. That is what the Good Food Chain company has said to us, but we are of course reconfirming that with the trusts because we want to get this right.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about investment in food and catering facilities. The truth is that it is important to have the best-quality food in hospitals. I am completely open to upgrading hospital equipment if that is what is necessary, and if it provides value for money. I have been struck by the number of hospital chief executives who have said that from the point of view of patient satisfaction, staff morale, and nutrition and the quality of food, bringing such food supplies in-house is the best thing they have done.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that in my constituency of Stone, where the Good Food Chain is situated, there is obviously very deep concern, not least because we had the horrendous Mid Staffs hospital crisis. I had to campaign on that against the Labour Government's refusal to give a full public inquiry, which our Government did give.

Having said that, is it not the case that the Good Food Chain is only responsible for the products that the patients consumed, and that the bacteria came from another company, which I am given to understand is called North Country Cooked Meats in Salford? I do commend Public Health England and the Secretary of State for the rapid way in which they identified the connections between these different places. Whereas it is absolutely essential that we have the root and branch review the Secretary of State has provided, is it not also the case that while the companies concerned will have to accept responsibility as far as it falls on them, at the same time there are really important reasons to identify exactly what did happen—where the food was contaminated, how it was contaminated—and then to exonerate the Good Food Chain, if in fact that is the case, because it is very unfair for companies to be caught up in something when it was not entirely their fault?

Matt Hancock: My right hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* Not yet. My hon. Friend rightly raises the question of the supply chain, and it is true that the food in question came from North Country Cooked Meats. In turn, we are trying to identify the suppliers to North Country Cooked Meats to get to the real root of this outbreak. He is quite right to identify that this is a supply chain issue, and that there is a complex supply chain in operation.

I join my hon. Friend in commending the work of Public Health England. Within days, it spotted the links between individual cases and, from a local incident, made this into a national incident. At the appropriate moment, it raised the issue with the chief medical officer and with Ministers in the Department, and we could then explain the problem to the public. Its work has identified the problem, and undoubtedly it has potentially saved lives.

Mr Speaker: I hope the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) will not be saddened by the fact that he is not yet a member of the Privy Council. After all, he is a Staffordshire knight, he has served his constituency

without interruption in this House for 35 years, and I remind the House that the hon. Gentleman has a whole chapter named after him in the late Hugo Young's estimable tome on Britain's relationship with Europe. There is a chapter in the name of Mr Bill Cash.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I, too, would like to express our sympathies with the families of the five patients who lost their lives, but also the four who remain critically ill. Obviously, we do not know what outcome they face.

As the shadow health spokesperson highlighted, these sandwiches were sold to 43 trusts, and while there have been no cases since 25 May, the incubation period of listeriosis is 70 days, so will surveillance of those 43 trusts continue alongside the Health Secretary's investigation?

The Food Standards Agency published a report in 2014 about the dangers of hospital food. It cited 32 failures, including sandwiches spending hours outside fridges, and fridges often not being cold enough. Indeed, it has been highlighted that hospital sandwiches have been the commonest source of listeria outbreaks over the past two decades.

As the Health Secretary says, simple cases are often a matter of people being unwell for a few days, but listeria poses a major threat to pregnant women, who may lose their child, and is life-threatening for people who are already ill. Will the Health Secretary therefore pay particular attention in his review to why on earth people who were seriously ill or frail were being fed sandwiches? Someone who has no appetite and is recovering from illness is simply not going to be tempted by a pack of sandwiches. That really makes the case for bringing food preparation in-hospital and producing tempting meals, because nutrition is critical to recovery.

Matt Hancock: I entirely agree with and endorse what the hon. Lady has said. She is quite right to point out that a meal has to be appetising as well as nutritious. The best hospitals deliver that, and I would like that practice to be much more widespread.

I reassure the hon. Lady that the 2014 report by the Food Standards Agency was, as I understand it, looked into in great detail and assurances have been made that what it raised has, correctly, been followed through. Obviously, that was before my time as Health Secretary but I have taken advice on precisely the point she raises and I have been assured that what was necessary happened. I am open-minded, however, on what may have happened and what more needs to be done, and the review will absolutely look into that question.

Finally, the hon. Lady is absolutely right about the incubation period. We remain vigilant. Because listeria is a notifiable disease, Public Health England is told of every case and is able to analyse the links from every new case to existing cases. Notification of most cases takes place after the fact, given the nature of the disease, but we are then able to find genetic links, where they exist, and find out whether different cases have the same source.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): As my right hon. Friend said in his opening remarks, one of the cases took place at the William Harvey Hospital in my constituency, and my constituent Tanya Marston, who is, happily, recovering from listeria, says that there should be a very urgent inquiry,

[Damian Green]

so I welcome the announcement that my right hon. Friend has made today. On the specific safety aspect, however, rather than the wider inquiry on nutrition, what is the timescale for coming to some kind of conclusion so that people can be reassured that hospital food is safe?

Matt Hancock: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and erstwhile campaign manager for his question. I am glad to hear that the patient who is his constituent is recovering. I am informed that all patients are either stable or have recovered, but for the five who tragically died. On the timescale, the urgent task at hand is to ensure that there are no further cases and that there is no more of the food that we know has the potential to cause problems in the food supply chain. That is what is going on right now. The timescale for the review will be a matter of months.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State knows, two of the tragic deaths occurred at Manchester Royal Infirmary. Our hearts go out to the families. Nothing could be worse than going to hospital poorly and trying to get better, and then dying because of a sandwich provided by the hospital to aid recovery. Like the Secretary of State, I want to pay tribute to Public Health England and the Manchester Royal Infirmary for acting so quickly in identifying the source and closing it down. As others have said, however, there are some wider questions. First, we need a bit more transparency. It is only today that we have learnt which other trusts have been affected. The what, the why and the how—there are still many questions we do not know the answer to. On food outsourcing, I welcome the review he identifies today, but surely we have to be a lot firmer in identifying that the growth in outsourcing food supplies is leading to some real safety issues and, potentially, to deaths.

Matt Hancock: I agree with the hon. Lady on the need for food to be produced in-house whenever possible, especially as the evidence from some of the best hospitals in the country is that it is also very good value for money. There really is no case for not doing that and I look forward to best practice spreading across the NHS. I will, like her, do what I can to make that happen. She asks about transparency. I made it clear that there are hospitals trusts where further information needs to be published. There is a need to tell patients first, which is why the information has come out at the pace that is has. That duty of candour is important, but of course the review will lead to full transparency. All that everybody wants to do is get to the bottom of this and learn lessons for the future.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I join those who have praised Public Health England? Not every hospital involved has necessarily had fatalities or major problems, but it was very important that Public Health England notified all those who might have been supplied by the same people. May I put it to the Secretary of State that we should not just think that there was one cause of listeriosis? It can come from processed vegetables, processed meats, ice cream and other things. May I ask him to recommend to everyone that people try to ensure there is safe handling, safe cooking and safe consumption to reduce the risk of

cross-contamination? When an outbreak happens, that is the way, as well as through the work of Public Health England, that people can help to ensure it does not affect them.

Matt Hancock: I agree wholeheartedly with the wise words of my hon. Friend.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): What is happening in hospitals? Surely we should be role-modelling fresh and healthy produce? Giving people packaged produce, including sandwiches, to eat gives them the wrong message about health and rehabilitation. Surely we should be role-modelling correct behavioural choices at every opportunity when somebody goes into hospital? Will the Secretary of State speak to the Government's behavioural insights team to consider taking that forward? In my experience, kitchens in hospitals do exist. If he looks deeply into the issue, he will find that staff and visitors often have restaurants in hospitals. However, fresh food from those restaurants is not always made available to patients. We need to tackle and stop that inequality, particularly when patients are fragile, frail and elderly.

Matt Hancock: I will happily look into the last point for the hon. Lady. She is absolutely right that a hospital should be a role model of fresh and healthy food, because after all, what is a hospital but a place to try to make us all healthy?

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Although there is no evidence that cost is behind the tragic cases that we have heard about, will the Secretary of State look in his root-and-branch review at the price that hospitals are paying for food? Spending £1 per meal is not enough for a healthy, nutritious meal for patients. Some trusts are spending less than £5 a day on a patient's food. Will he also look at legislating for safe staffing levels, so that there are enough nurses on wards to feed patients? About a third of patients are eating less than half the food that is served to them and are suffering from malnutrition. Will he look at both those issues to improve patient safety?

Matt Hancock: Making sure that there are enough nurses on wards is incredibly important for delivering good patient care not just in relation to food, but more broadly. My hon. Friend raises the question of price per meal. It is interesting that the hospitals that have brought food production in-house and source not necessarily locally distributed food but locally produced food, have often found that that reduces costs rather than raises them. This is a question not of resources, but of good practice.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I welcome the announcement of the root-and-branch review and I know that patient safety continues to be a top priority for the Secretary of State, but can he reassure me and my constituents that the overall risk of listeriosis remains low?

Matt Hancock: Yes, of course. Millions of meals are served in NHS hospitals each year. While we regret any death, especially a death that could have been avoided, the overall food in hospitals absolutely is safe.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The NHS is a pioneer of and, increasingly, an international authority on the new science of genomics. Will the Minister confirm

that without this NHS expertise, the source of the outbreak would not have been identified nearly as quickly and that we could well have been looking at far more deaths than in fact occurred?

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point—even more than he says. Without genomics, which the UK is the world leader in, it would have been impossible to link the different listeria deaths. They would have looked like individual cases in separate, individual hospitals. It is only because through genomics it could be worked out that the exact strain of listeria was the same in cases in different hospitals that we could then work out that there must have been a factor at work that was not internal to the hospital. When it was then identified that the food provider provided food to many different hospitals, that link could be made, too. Science and scientific progress are saving lives here.

Recall of Tumble Dryers

5.8 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on his decision to recall 500,000 unsafe tumble dryers manufactured by Whirlpool UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Government take the safety of electrical products very seriously. For our children, relatives and families, we all want our homes to be places of safety and security. I provided an update to the House at departmental questions last week on the most recent steps taken by the Office for Product Safety and Standards in respect of Whirlpool tumble dryers. This follows the OPSS review of the actions taken by Whirlpool in relation to its corrective action. The findings of the review were published on 4 April. The OPSS review examined in detail the modification programme put in place by Whirlpool as well as technical documents supplied by Whirlpool. The review concluded that the risk posed by modified tumble dryers is low.

The Office for Product Safety and Standards produced a list of required actions for the business to take, and Whirlpool was given 28 days to respond, outlining the actions that it would take. The response received from Whirlpool was considered to be inadequate. As a result, the OPSS has written to Whirlpool to inform the company of its intention to serve a recall notice under the provisions of the General Product Safety Regulations 2005 in respect of the unmodified tumble dryers that remain in homes in the UK. As required by law, Whirlpool was given 10 days' notice of that intention, which allowed it time to submit its views prior to the service of the recall notice or to seek arbitration in line with the provisions in the GPSR. Officials in the OPSS are reviewing Whirlpool's response to determine whether it fully meets the requirements laid down in the draft recall notice.

At this time, all enforcement options remain on the table, including serving a formal recall notice. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further while the legal process is ongoing, but I will update the House in due course. It is important to stress that consumers who have had their affected tumble dryers modified can continue to use them and that those with an unmodified affected tumble dryer have been urged to unplug them and to contact Whirlpool. I encourage all consumers to register their appliances to ensure they receive updates on product modification and recalls. The OPSS will continue to monitor the situation closely and will take any steps it deems appropriate to ensure that consumers in the UK continue to enjoy the high levels of protection they have come to expect.

Andy Slaughter: I thank the Minister for her response, although, given the lack of action by Whirlpool, and indeed the Government, over a four-year period, there are many questions to be asked. If they cannot all be answered today, I would be grateful if she could write to me and perhaps meet me and other interested Members, as this is clearly an ongoing matter.

The fire that destroyed 20 flats in a 19-storey block in my constituency in 2016 was one of hundreds of fires caused by over 100 models of tumble dryer manufactured

[*Andy Slaughter*]

between 2004 and 2015 by companies now all owned by Whirlpool, but when I met Whirlpool a couple of weeks ago, it could not even say how many reports of fires it was receiving each week. This is the most serious consumer safety issue for many years. At one stage, it was estimated that one in six households in the UK had a faulty Whirlpool tumble dryer in use. Why has it taken four years to reach this point, despite repeated requests for recall from the fire brigade and others? What steps will the Government now take to ensure that unmodified dryers are recalled? I heard what the Minister said, but anything less than a recall now would be considered wholly inadequate.

What is the basis for the estimate of 300,000 to 500,000 unmodified machines in service, given that 5.5 million were sold and only 5,000 have been modified since Whirlpool estimated itself that there were 1 million unmodified dryers in December 2017? If it goes ahead, how will the recall process work, as a matter of law and in practice, given that, as the Minister said, it is unprecedented? What progress has the OPSS made on setting up the recall database that we were promised would be live by the end of this year? What further advice is being given to the owners of Whirlpool tumble dryers? Why has Whirlpool still not published on its website the list of model numbers affected, and why is it refusing to give one to Which? and Electrical Safety First? Why did the advice change from the OPSS? It seemed quite happy with the advice in April. Will the Government look again at the modification process and at the evidence compiled by Which? saying that the modified machines are still liable to catch fire?

Finally, does the Minister agree with what her predecessor, the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), said in asking the planted question last week, which is that there remain grave concerns about the “straightness” of Whirlpool? What will the Government do about this company, which has flouted the rules here? Is it not time to get tough?

Kelly Tolhurst: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concern, specifically for his constituency, given the desperately sad incident that occurred there. He is absolutely right to ask these questions and raise these concerns, as would be any consumer who believed they were at risk.

We carried out the review at the behest of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who ordered a review of the Whirlpool modification process in 2018. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the review looked at the effectiveness of the technical modification and the adequacy of the outreach programme. It concluded that the risk was low, and was further reduced by the modification. Following the review, we issued a 28-day notice letter to Whirlpool, specifying issues on which we wanted more information and assurances. We were unsatisfied by its response, which is why, on 4 June, we issued a letter of intent of notice of a recall.

Following conversations that I had with the hon. Gentleman last week, he wrote to me at the end of the week asking for a meeting. As I said to him last week, I should be more than happy to meet him to discuss any of his concerns about the ongoing process. My absolute intention is to ensure that we hold companies to account

when we do not believe that they are carrying out their legal obligation, which is to place safe products on the market.

The hon. Gentleman is entirely right to be concerned about the future prevention of fires. I can tell him that, according to Home Office data, there were 224 fires caused by tumble dryers in 2017-18, a 10% reduction on the previous year’s figure of 808. We will obviously do all that is required to ensure that consumers are kept free of harm. We are following due process, in line with the regulations, in order to ensure that Whirlpool carries out its obligations.

I am more than happy to answer any further questions from the hon. Gentleman in detail as the process continues, and, as I have said, I am also more than happy to meet any colleague at any time.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Can the Minister give us some indication of how many machines the Government think are still out there which could be risky, in the light of the high incidence of fires that she has reported?

Kelly Tolhurst: In response to a query from Which?, Whirlpool said that 1.7 million cases had already been resolved. It estimates that another 500,000 machines are still in people’s homes.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on his relentless campaigning, and for securing this important question.

The Government stated their intention to initiate a recall notice to Whirlpool on 4 June, but that only became apparent in the House during topical questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on Tuesday 11 June. Can the Minister explain why she did not make a statement about the decision, which she has described as “unprecedented”, but which she considered not to be “unprecedented” enough to inform the House about it?

The issue of Whirlpool and its faulty products has been one of the biggest consumer safety issues for many years. The relevant fault affected more than 5 million tumble dryers under brand names that are now owned by Whirlpool UK, which were manufactured between 2004 and 2015. I welcome the recall notice regarding the 500,000 unmodified products, but I am seriously concerned about the millions of modified Whirlpool products that are still in people’s homes, and whose owners have reported fires and faults despite the modifications. Which? spoke to more than 30 owners who have said that their “fixed” tumble dryers have caught fire, or have produced smoke or a smell of burning. There are millions of those modified machines out there in people’s homes. Consumer safety must be our utmost priority, so will the Minister demand a full investigation of those reports, and go further by demanding a recall of the modified products too?

In April, the Office for Product Safety and Standards published findings of its inquiry into Whirlpool’s handling of the risk of the machines. It found that the risk of fire was “low”, and therefore no recall notice action was taken. Which? considered that the “inquiry is fundamentally flawed”, and that

“it appears to favour business interests over people’s safety”.

The investigators failed to speak to any affected Whirlpool customers as part of the review, and further failed to verify the history of the 28 Whirlpool dryers that it tested, which meant that it was unable to draw conclusions about when the machines had been modified and by whom. The inquiry was published in April and the Minister's subsequent contradictory decision to issue a recall notice obviously raises serious questions about the OPSS. Will the Minister clearly outline why she came to a different decision from the OPSS in April? Does she now believe that the OPSS investigation was fundamentally flawed and will she announce an investigation into that review to look at whether it was properly undertaken and whether there are lessons to learn for the future?

Kelly Tolhurst: I must start by outlining that the protection of consumers, the safety of consumers and the safety of products placed on the market are of utmost importance to me and this Government. I did indeed update the House last week in response to a question about the action that we have taken in regards to Whirlpool; it is part of a legal process, as I have already outlined. All complaints about modified or unmodified tumble dryers that have been duly registered were included in the review. The review was significant: it looked at many areas, took all the data into account, and carried out the assessments, as the hon. Lady has outlined, and I am absolutely satisfied that the review undertaken by OPSS was appropriate and robust.

I have not taken a different decision from OPSS. We were very clear. OPSS wrote to Whirlpool after the review outlining areas where it wanted a guarantee of further work. Whirlpool had 28 days in which to respond. It responded, and the OPSS reviewed that information and was not satisfied, finding that the commitment was inadequate. We therefore decided to issue a notice—an intention to recall. As I have outlined today, we will be reviewing what has been submitted by Whirlpool. There is no intention to put, as has been suggested, big business over the needs and safety of consumers, and we will not do that. Fundamentally, the safety of people in their homes is of utmost importance to me and the Government and I will do everything in my power to make sure that large companies and manufacturers absolutely comply with their legal obligation to place only products that are safe on the market. If they fail to do so, this Government will take appropriate action to hold them to account.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I congratulate both the OPSS and the Minister on having the cojones to hold Whirlpool to account, because there is no doubt that Whirlpool has been shifty on this and the Minister has called it out, so I say well done. Does she agree that it sends a clear message to business that either they put their house in order and ensure that their products are safe or the Government will act and have a product recall?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and acknowledge his role in instigating the review of Whirlpool's modification programme last May. Let me reiterate that the law is clear: manufacturers have a responsibility to ensure that only safe products are placed on the market, and appropriate action must be taken when a safety issue is identified. We will make sure that any organisations placing unsafe products on the market are forced to comply with the law, and we will continue to hold them to account.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): This matter does not seem to have been handled well, either by Whirlpool or by the UK Government, from start to finish. Surely our first priority should be, as the Minister said, to protect our constituents and ensure that they are not at risk from fire. If there are still 500,000 unmodified products out there, and if the risk of them going on fire is 1%, we are looking at a potential of 5,000 fires. If the risk is half that, we are still looking at 2,500 fires and the risk to life that comes with them. What assessment has been made of the risk from the modified tumble dryers? Concerns have been raised that modified dryers are also continuing to go on fire.

The other thing I am confused about is why the Government took so long to take action, given that this issue was first recognised by Whirlpool in 2015. If it takes the OPSS and the Government so long to undertake a review and put sanctions in place against a company, there is surely an issue with the system. Will the Government, as a result of the issues raised, look at the product recall system in general and ensure that a review is undertaken, so that we no longer have such incredibly lengthy waits when products are recalled, and so that the Government can take action more quickly than they have done in this case?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I outlined earlier, the review of Whirlpool was a review of the modification programme. It looked at the effectiveness of the technical modifications and the adequacy of the outreach programme. The review concluded that there was a low risk from unmodified machines, and an even lower risk from modified ones. The wider review was concerned with the actions that Whirlpool took to resolve any risk of lint fires in its machines. I believe that its findings were robust and proportionate. The info that was provided to us via Which? and "Watchdog" and the testing carried out by Which? were also featured and taken into account in the review. However, the review very much focused on the technical effectiveness of the modifications.

The reason that this has taken so long, as the hon. Lady suggests, is that we followed due process in carrying out a substantial review, making our assumptions and providing Whirlpool with laid-down notice to come back to us with what it would do to rectify the situation. I would just highlight that part of enforcing consumer and product safety involves ensuring that we carry out a review when we believe that manufacturers are not fulfilling their obligations under the regulations, and that we follow due process in doing so. We will continue to do that where there are concerns about any product that is placed on the market. We will ensure that organisations and large manufacturers comply with the law.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): All too often in my previous life I saw the damage, despair and devastation—not to mention the risk to life—that fire can bring to a family home. Will my hon. Friend confirm that product safety and standards remain a priority for this Government, and that manufacturers of white goods such as Whirlpool must act promptly and responsibly when faced with the evidence of goods not being fit for purpose? This journey of risk has been unacceptably long, but I thank her for the robust action that she has recently taken.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I note his particular interest in this as a result of his past career. He is absolutely right to suggest that we will ensure that large manufacturers such as Whirlpool comply with the regulations if they find that a technical change needs to be made to their products. We expect them to take appropriate action where a risk has been identified. This is indeed a priority for this Government. It has been a priority since I have been in post, and we will continue to ensure that these organisations comply with the law.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The recall has been far too long coming. As soon as Whirlpool became aware of the problem, it should have acted immediately and recalled every affected machine. As it is, it has sat back and waited years, and consumer safety has been at risk, with the Government finally stepping in last week. The public are rightly terrified of the danger that could be sitting in their homes. People who contact Electrical Safety First, Which? and other consumer bodies are struggling to find assistance because Whirlpool has refused to publish a list of the affected machines. Instead, members of the public have to wade through a series of hidden steps on the Whirlpool website to try to establish whether they have a potential fire hazard in their home. Why has Whirlpool been allowed to get away with that? A list should be readily available, so will the Minister commit to ensuring that Whirlpool publishes one immediately?

Kelly Tolhurst: We are following due process, and we are taking action. This has been an ongoing piece of work. When issues with the modification programme were raised, my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), instigated the review, and OPSS has been working since then and has been in continual communication with Whirlpool. It is vital that we follow due process and, whether the organisation involved is small or large, that we ensure that any action is proportionate and correct. Any consumer with concerns about the tumble dryer in their home can get in touch with Whirlpool by entering the serial number and model to check whether their product is affected, and we encourage anyone who is worried about the product in their home to contact Whirlpool immediately.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I do not talk about this in public a lot, but I lost my father in an electrical accident when I was 10, and there has not been a Father's Day in 40 years when I have not wished that he was still here. Consumer safety must come first, and I thank the Minister for the action she has taken. We have some of the strongest consumer safety standards in the world, but enforcement is sometimes challenging. Will she therefore take this opportunity to consider ways of strengthening the enforcement, and will she examine whether the penalties for producers are effective and strong enough?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I am sorry to hear about her father, particularly since this urgent question comes the day after Father's Day. She is absolutely right. This action serves as a warning to manufacturers that if they put unsafe products on the market, this Government will act to make them comply with the law. The beauty of the OPSS, which this Government set up in January 2018, is not only that it is

a national body that takes responsibility for national crises, but that it supports local enforcers on the ground with scientific and research-based knowledge. I assure my hon. Friend that we are taking the matter seriously, and this is a warning to manufacturers that we will enforce the law if we believe that they are not complying.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on his dogged pursuit of this consumer scandal. Is not too much onus being left on consumers to understand the potential risks to their machines? If half a million Whirlpool machines are still unmodified, how exactly are the Government tracking progress? If they proceed to recall, which they should, how will they ensure that Whirlpool is successful in getting the message through to the owners of all those machines?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady raises an important point on how we reach consumers, and part of the review covered the adequacy of the outreach programme. Our review found that Whirlpool needs to do more in that space, which is exactly why we issued a notice for Whirlpool to tell us what it will do further on the intention to recall. Whirlpool had time to respond, and we asked for further information on how it will get that information out to consumers. That will be a key part of how we review anything that Whirlpool submits to us, and the process will be ongoing if the recall notice is served or if Whirlpool decides to undertake a recall itself.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): We ought to recognise that Whirlpool took over Indesit Hotpoint in 2014. It identified the problem in 2015 and has been trying to take action, but not fully adequately.

Will the Minister ask Whirlpool to make sure that the website better identifies the EU product safety site, as with Creda, Proline or Swan? Will she also ask the search engines, especially Google, to feature product recall information on the first search page, preferably even before the advertisements? Finally, will she indicate that safe products have a green dot inside the door? If people want to know the serial number and model, that is also inside the door.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend. As he requests, I will ask Whirlpool how it can make its website more user-friendly. I cannot give him any guarantees on Google's actions, but I am sure that is something we can take forward. He has previously raised his final point in the House, and consumers will therefore have heard him. I reiterate that, if consumers are concerned about the products in their home, they can go on the website and call the Whirlpool helpline. If their tumble dryer has been modified, continued use is a low risk. We recommend that unmodified dryers are unplugged and not used and that Whirlpool is contacted.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): By the Government's own admission, there are 500,000 unmodified machines in existence, which equates to around 700 per constituency. The Minister has just reaffirmed that the Government's advice is to unplug these machines. How are those 700 people in Delyn supposed to know that?

Kelly Tolhurst: The right hon. Gentleman outlines that there are 500,000 machines, which is not a Government estimate—we have used data to estimate the number of

dryers still in people's homes. As I said to the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), Whirlpool has an outreach programme to communicate with individuals who have not yet contacted Whirlpool and who it believes to have faulty equipment.

We recommend that anyone who buys any kind of electrical appliance should register it so that the manufacturer can easily contact those who have a particular product—this is not just for Whirlpool but for any kind of electrical product that is sold. It is vital that consumers take the time to register their purchase so it is easy for the manufacturer to contact them if any faults or problems are found with the machine.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the action she has taken. One of the first cases I received as a newly elected Member of Parliament was on the safety of tumble dryers; the issue came up at my first surgery. As a member of the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, I have to say that I have been singularly unimpressed with Whirlpool's attitude to this problem. Part of the problem lies in trying to find where these machines are, so is the Minister entirely satisfied with our current system for the registration of appliances in this country? It is sometimes very difficult to find serial numbers and model numbers, especially where appliances have been fitted in kitchens or utility rooms, for example. These are real, live issues. Is she satisfied that this system is adequate for purpose?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for that. He is right to raise concerns about whether the system is suitable, and whether all appliances are easily identified and registered. We definitely need to look, on an ongoing basis, at whether some of the products being placed on the market are easily identified. He is right to highlight the issue with built-in appliances, as it is sometimes difficult to remove them to get the serial number. As I have said, I recommend that all consumers register their appliances on the registermyappliance site. We will keep all information under review, but I remain determined to ensure that where manufacturers do not comply with the law we will take enforcement action. That is why I am pleased to be standing here today outlining the steps we are moving through to make sure that we comply with the regulation on the enforcement.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): With an estimated 700 affected appliances per constituency, it is not surprising that I have been contacted by a number of constituents affected, including Linda Thomas, who was advised to contact Peterborough trading standards, it being the trading standards body responsible for this Whirlpool issue. She tells me that she feels very much that Peterborough trading standards are "on the side of Whirlpool and 'not the consumer'".

What assessment has the Minister made of the impartiality of Peterborough trading standards, in the light of the emails revealed by the BBC as a result of freedom of information requests?

Kelly Tolhurst: Trading standards, in Peterborough or anywhere else nationally, are carrying out, every day, the important work of enforcing safety issues; they are taking lots of enforcement action. I, for one, am very proud of and grateful to trading standards officers, who

sometimes work in challenging circumstances but do some fantastic work. One reason the OPSS was set up was in January last year was to look at product safety and standards, and it was the body that carried out the review of the Whirlpool modification programme, working with regional trading standards, including Peterborough's. Trading standards do have the ability to work with the OPSS on the scientific research and data, using the expertise the OPSS brings to help them carry out their duty locally. Therefore, I very much disagree on this; action taken by any enforcement body is being taken on behalf of the consumer, not in the interests of large manufacturers.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If any of my constituents correctly identify their tumble dryer as a potentially unsafe model, how quickly would the Minister expect them to be given a replacement by Whirlpool?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend asks when his constituents would have a replacement. I would say that the affected tumble dryer should be modified, but any action must be taken swiftly. The particular circumstance, the age of the model and the brand of the model would dictate which action Whirlpool takes.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Minister for her comments, but I am still extremely concerned that 500,000 machines are at large. As the chair of the all-party group on disability, I am particularly concerned about whether notifications have gone out in accessible formats, because if people have disabilities they might not see a fire so quickly or be able to leave their homes so quickly should one start. Will the Minister speak to Whirlpool and make sure that the notifications are in formats that are accessible for all?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that issue and will do as she asks.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UK may well have one of the strongest consumer protection regimes in the world, but does the Minister agree that things need to be under constant review? Can she assure me that the OPSS has sufficient resources, powers and skills to do what we expect of it?

Kelly Tolhurst: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the OPSS has the powers and funds necessary to carry out its work. The beauty of the OPSS is that it is absolutely focused on product safety and standards. Part of its £12 million per annum funding is for building scientific and technical expertise. It works with trading standards locally and nationally and provides the national leadership required on national issues such as this one.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): The Minister will know that registration rates for white goods are typically less than 30%, which means that more than 70% of people typically do not register their products. That is understandable—they are frightened of being sold to or contacted for lots of other reasons—so surely it is now time to take the onus off the consumer and have a central register, from the point of sale, that can be used only in the event of a recall.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for that suggestion. I will commit today to making that a topic for discussion at the Consumer Protection Partnership, which is the group of organisations that sit together to consider consumer protections. Perhaps we can look into whether that would be more beneficial for consumers. I reiterate that the Government have a recall website that gives the details of all white goods that are subject to recall or fire risk. All consumers should register their appliances. It is down to the manufacturer to make sure that the products are safe, but if consumers take the simple step of registering their goods in the first instance, when they buy them, before any changes are made, that is the best way forward.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Might not many of these tumble dryers have been resold in the second-hand market? If so, what is the Minister doing to assess the dangers of the resale of such machines, bearing in mind that local authority trading standards have been decimated by Tory austerity cuts?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have outlined, it does not matter whether the product is second hand or has been with its original owners since purchase. If a dryer is affected and is unmodified, consumers should contact Whirlpool. I reiterate that when the OPSS carried out its review of the modification programme, it took all the data into consideration and the risk was deemed to be low and further reduced for modified tumble dryers. I therefore urge any consumer with a tumble dryer in their home to look to see whether it is one of the products affected and make contact with Whirlpool.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister has said that modified machines are low risk, yet last year the BBC's "Watchdog" live consumer programme uncovered cases in which machines had caught fire even after being fixed. Can modified machines be deemed to be low risk, even though they catch fire?

Kelly Tolhurst: The right hon. Gentleman talks about modified machines. When any information or testing that had been carried out at any particular event by "Watchdog" or Which? was submitted to the Department or to the OPSS, it was scrutinised and looked at during the review of the modification process. The outcome was to put the risk level at low. However, anyone who has a concern about any machine should contact Whirlpool. In actual fact, if anyone has any concern about any electrical appliance within their home, they should stop using it and contact the manufacturer.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): A number of my constituents contacted me with their concerns about Whirlpool. With Electrical Safety First research pointing to the fact that only 10% to 20% of recalled products are ever returned or repaired, we should perhaps consider looking at a statutory basis for online retailers to contact people who bought products online, because they certainly will have a means of contacting their consumers—they will have email addresses and other

details for the products that have been dispatched. Perhaps that could be an easier way for some retailers to contact people to get that recall information to them.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting that point. One of the issues that we considered in last year's review was the outreach programme. There are many ways in which Whirlpool should be able to contact the people who have bought its products. This is very much the responsibility of the manufacturer, and it is one of the reasons we are taking so much care with this review, and why we are asking so many questions. It is the responsibility of the manufacturer to make sure that it has a programme that is sufficient to reach its customers. We are dissatisfied with what it has done. That is why we issued the intention to issue a recall. She is absolutely correct: Whirlpool should be using everything at its disposal to make sure that it contacts anyone who has purchased its product by any means necessary.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The Whirlpool situation has highlighted a problem exposed by the Electrical Safety Council about the difficulty of identifying the owners of the defective appliances it recalls. Can the Minister say a little more about what progress has been made on requiring the registration of purchase of electrical goods at point of sale by the retailer, rather than by consumers registering afterwards? Consumer registration patently does not work, and the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) is not a new one; it has been knocking around for years and the retail industry needs to own up to its responsibility.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I know that he has a particular interest in this matter. He will know that, when I last sat in front of him at the meeting of the all-party group on fire safety, I was very clear that if action needed to be taken I was not fearful of taking it. As I tried to outline to the hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), it is a valid suggestion, and I do agree that we need to look at it. That is why I have said here today that I am prepared to bring that to the Consumer Protection Partnership to see whether we can progress it further. He is absolutely right: we need to do all we can to ensure that consumers are protected, but fundamentally I am here today to talk about holding Whirlpool to account, and I am proud to be standing here and doing that. This Government want to ensure that, no matter how big manufacturers are, we will still make them comply with the law.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Where is the Whirlpool list of model numbers that may be at risk?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I have outlined, anyone who has one of the brands that are affected—Hotpoint, Indesit, Swan, Proline and Creda, manufactured between April 2004 and September 2015—should go to the Whirlpool website and put in their model and serial numbers to find out whether it is an affected model. If they do not want to go on to the website, they should ring Whirlpool's helpline.

Gulf of Oman Oil Tanker Attacks

5.55 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office if he will make a statement on the attacks on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): The Government completely condemn the attacks on two tankers on 13 June. This is deeply worrying at a time of already significant tension.

Following our own assessment, the UK concludes that it is almost certain that a branch of the Iranian military, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, attacked the two tankers on 13 June. No other state or non-state actor could plausibly have been responsible. These latest attacks build on a pattern of destabilising Iranian behaviour and pose a serious danger to peace and stability in the region. In targeting civilian shipping, international norms have been violated. It is essential that tankers and crews are able to pass through international waters safely. We call on Iran urgently to cease all forms of destabilising activity, and I reiterated that point during my meeting with the Iranian ambassador this afternoon.

The UK remains in close co-ordination with international partners to find diplomatic solutions to de-escalate tensions. I plan to visit Tehran shortly when I will seek to assist in that de-escalatory process aimed at establishing common ground and a peaceful way forward that will command the respect of all parties.

Jo Swinson: I thank the Minister for that reply.

Tensions are rising incredibly quickly in the wake of the recent tanker attacks in the Gulf of Oman, and, of course, as the Minister mentions, the ongoing destabilising behaviour and threats from Iran to increase low-level uranium production. These attacks must be condemned forcefully by all Members from all parts of the House. The Government have yet to provide conclusive evidence beyond the grainy video footage. While the Leader of the Opposition has been quick to question British intelligence and lay all the blame for the escalation at the door of the United States, the German Foreign Minister has urged restraint in assigning responsibility for the attacks and is seeking additional evidence.

The Minister has repeated what the Foreign Secretary said at the weekend: that Iran is almost certainly behind the attacks in the guise of IRGC. Can he explain what the remaining area of uncertainty is and what additional information would be required to prove that Iran is in fact responsible beyond doubt? While fully appreciating that there are, of course, intelligence sensitivities, do the Government recognise that releasing additional evidence into the public domain where possible, or sharing that with allies on a confidential basis, would help to garner further support to build international agreement and, indeed, hopefully dampen tensions or to be able to take any action necessary? Does he agree that an independent inspection from a trusted third party to look at these vessels would be an important part of the answer?

The Minister talked about his talks and his wish to de-escalate the crisis and reach a peaceful diplomatic solution, which is hugely important, in partnership not just with the US but with our European allies. Of course,

as he mentioned, the strait of Hormuz is a vital shipping lane, with nearly 30% of oil exports passing through it. What steps is he taking to protect civilian shipping in the region?

Finally, I want to ask about the impact on UK nationals. There are significant numbers of UK nationals living in the region who will look at these escalations and have concerns. What assessment has been made of what would be needed if an evacuation of UK nationals was necessary in the event that tensions were to escalate further, when were such plans last tested and what confidence does the Minister have that those contingencies, which we hope will never be needed, are in place? Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and her husband have gone on hunger strike in protest at her treatment. What steps are being taken to ensure that whatever course of action is pursued does not have any adverse effect on securing the release of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and other British nationals in prison?

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Lady for her comprehensive list of questions. I will do my best to answer them—perhaps in reverse order, given that I raised the issue of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe with the Iranian ambassador this afternoon. Our position is that we want consular access to Nazanin, and we have reiterated to the ambassador our concern for her welfare. The hon. Lady will be aware that the Iranians will claim that we have no business in this matter because Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is a dual national, but we will persist.

On what we are doing to protect shipping and individuals, I emphasise that our aim is to de-escalate the situation and turn down the temperature. I believe that our European friends and partners feel the same way. We will continue to act with the E3 in particular to dial this down, and that is our best way forward in ensuring that all are protected—that the vital trade routes through the straits are protected, and particularly that our nationals in the Gulf region are safe.

The hon. Lady presses me on intelligence. She knows very well that I am not going to comment in detail, or indeed at all, on intelligence. What I can say to her is that we make our own assessment. I hope that she will recognise the form of words that I have used, which is well understood. We are as sure as we can be of the source of this latest attack. Indeed, although the hon. Lady has not mentioned this specifically, we also associate Iran with the attacks of 12 May.

In relation to the assessments made by others, I think it is true to say that our means of determining provenance are among the very best in the world. Others will of course make their own assessments, which are of great interest, but I stand by my assessment that I have iterated to the hon. Lady; I believe that it is of high quality and is highly reliable. She mentioned the Leader of the Opposition, and he must speak for himself.

On the independent investigation, the vessels, which since the attack of 13 June were in international waters, remain the property of the ship owners. At the moment, they are being taken to Fujairah in the Emirates. It is for the ship owners to determine what investigation will now take place and who will carry out that investigation. I hope that gives the hon. Lady some confidence that we were approaching the matter in a balanced way, but let me reiterate the Government's intention to do all in our power to de-escalate this difficult situation.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The House will welcome the Minister's measured statement and, in particular, the fact that he intends to go to Tehran shortly. Will he underline the fact that the Government will use all their influence, particularly with regional organisations—above all, with the United Nations, which is the right place for this matter to be resolved—to de-escalate what is happening in the Gulf? In particular, will he redouble efforts on Britain's behalf in respect of the Iran nuclear deal to bring all parties back to the table as soon as possible?

Dr Murrison: It is vital that we keep to the joint comprehensive plan of action, as I discussed with His Excellency the Iranian ambassador a short while ago. The International Atomic Energy Agency is currently of the view that Iran is compliant. That is important. Its last determination was made on 31 May, so we would routinely expect one in three months' time—in August—but the agency does keep the matter under continuous review. Clearly, we want to hold Iran to the commitments that it made with the P5+1 and the European Union, and hope very much that that forms the basis of a productive way forward.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question; I also thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) for raising it.

The attacks on oil tankers in the strait of Hormuz are utterly unacceptable, as I am sure every Member will agree. For those of us old enough to remember, they are frighteningly reminiscent of the tanker war of the 1980s, with all the global economic consequences that resulted from that conflict. Just like then, we are at an extremely dangerous juncture, where Iran risks sliding back into a permanent state of isolation from and confrontation with the west. That is, of course, what the theocrats in Iran have always craved and what the Iran nuclear deal was in place to prevent before it was so recklessly and deliberately scuppered by the neo-cons in the Trump Administration, who even now are rattling their sabres in their own craving for war. With that being the case, the question is: where do we go from here?

The Foreign Secretary has rightly warned of the dangers of ever greater escalation in the region and of Britain becoming "enmeshed" in a new conflict, but I would say to the Government that if we face a situation where the theocrat hardliners in Tehran and the neo-con hawks in the White House want to start a regime change conflict in Iran—a country nine times the size of Syria—we have a choice about whether or not to become enmeshed, and it should be this Parliament that makes that choice.

More importantly and more urgently, what we must now do as a country, through the United Nations—as both Secretary-General Guterres and the German Government have called for—is to work to de-escalate the situation as the Minister has suggested, so that it is not just Ali Khamenei on one side and John Bolton on the other deciding to plunge the middle east into this catastrophe, but sensible diplomats from all countries working to independently investigate and verify the facts around the tanker attacks, to prevent any repeat of them and, most of all, to stop the descent into a war that we all fear, and getting the nuclear deal back on track instead. What action will the Minister take this week towards each of those ends?

Dr Murrison: I hope the hon. Gentleman got the sense from my remarks that the UK Government's position is that we need to dial this down. He spent some time talking about the Trump Administration. Our position of course is that we respect the US very much indeed; nevertheless, we take our own view on these matters. We have made our own independent assessment, and have listened very carefully to, for example, our E3 colleagues and the position that they have taken. On the other hand, it would be wrong not to record our deep disquiet regarding the destabilising actions of the Iranian Administration. They are quite clearly using proxies to destabilise the region. As the hon. Gentleman will know from his deep experience of these matters, that cannot be allowed to continue.

We need to make it absolutely clear to Tehran—I will lose no opportunity to do so—that its support for terrorist groups is just unacceptable. I hope the hon. Gentleman will join the Government in condemning absolutely the actions of the Iranian Government in that respect. I do appreciate that he is under some difficulty given the stance taken by the Leader of the Opposition, but the hon. Gentleman is a good man and I know that he takes an independent view of these things. I hope that he will understand full well the danger of allowing the activities of the sort we have seen from Tehran to continue unchecked. Although I have suggested to him that our stance is very much de-escalatory—this situation is dangerous, we need to turn the temperature down and we must work with our partners to do so—we do have to make it very clear that this behaviour on the part of Iran is not acceptable and that if it wants a peaceful, productive future, it is going to have to work with us in containing some of the appalling behaviour that we have seen displayed across the region.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Does the Minister agree that responsibility for escalating tension lies firmly with the Iranian regime that has been sponsoring or carrying out these acts of sabotage? When he visits Tehran, will he make it clear to that regime that attacking Norwegian, Japanese and other foreign shipping is far more likely to bring the United States and her European allies closer together than to drive them apart?

Dr Murrison: My right hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about these things, will know very well that when dealing with Iran we are dealing with a number of moving parts, and sometimes it can be a challenge to know who precisely to address. However, if I were offering candid advice, I would say to Tehran: "The worst thing you can possibly do is to attack ships in the ownership of countries like Norway and Japan—that seems to be highly counterproductive."

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson)—the other Dunbartonshire—on gaining this UQ today. I also congratulate the Minister on the tone that he is taking in terms of trying to turn down the heat.

It is clear that the ongoing tension in the Gulf of Oman is of grave concern to the entire House. I doubt, though, that many of us are shocked that we have reached this present position, because the tension between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran is

founded in a complex history, predating the Islamic Republic at the times of the tyranny of the Shah and the overthrowing of democratic government. We need to be aware that that informs the present situation.

While SNP Members join the Minister in his condemnation, the idea that the Government's assessment leads to

“responsibility for the attacks almost certainly”

—“almost certainly” being the operative words—lying with Iran gives cause for concern. I therefore hope that the call by the United Nations, as we have heard, for an independent entity to conduct an investigation would be the next step. I hope that the Minister agrees.

As we often hear the Government talk of “global Britain”, will the Minister advise the House on what plans they have to urge a re-engagement to de-escalate the tension between Iran and the United States, and other allies such as Norway, which is a close ally of the UK? May I congratulate him on going to Tehran to have these direct conversations?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. In terms of what we are doing, talking is important, because if we do not talk, there is a risk of misunderstanding and miscalculation, and nowhere is that more likely than in our dealings with Iran, with whom, I think it is true to say, we have not always enjoyed cordial relations. I would not want to downplay that at all. The fact that I hope to go to Tehran very soon is perhaps, I hope, evidence of our desire to make sure that we maintain a dialogue on these matters with Tehran.

The hon. Gentleman tried to press me on intelligence matters. I am not going to be drawn on that. I think he must understand from what I have said that we are quite clear where the blame for this lies. He calls for an independent investigation. I hope that I made it clear in response to an earlier question that this matter must primarily rest with the ship owners, since the vessels are currently in international waters—or they were. They are now on their way to the United Arab Emirates.

On the earlier attack on the 12th of last month, that is, of course, since it happened within UAE territorial waters, a matter for the UAE. We are assisting, in a small way, in that investigation. I have to say again that our assessment is that the authority that is highly likely to have been involved in causing that earlier incident is the same one that we firmly believe is responsible for the latest outrage.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) for this urgent question and my right hon. Friend the Minister for his response—a measured response that is helpful to the House. He made clear his determination to calm this situation down. It is a complex and very long-standing situation that has very recently increased quite markedly in vehemence.

Will my right hon. Friend continue to emphasise to all parties the risks and dangers of actions such as those at the weekend, and of words that raise the temperature and increase the risk of an armed confrontation by accident or design? Will he say a little about where we are in terms of the improved financial facility as part of our obligations to the JCPOA, which remains unfinished business? Above all, will we make it very clear to all

parties in the region that a further war would be a disaster that could not be confined to its boundaries, that the consequences would be long-lasting and incredibly onerous, and that all states owe an obligation to their peoples to desist from such actions and do everything they can to prevent such a risk of war in the region again?

Dr Murrison: My right hon. Friend and predecessor knows a great deal about this region. I pay tribute to him because I think this is the first opportunity I have had to do so. I congratulate him on his extraordinary service.

In relation to the cost of what might perhaps happen, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. About a fifth of the world's oil passes through the strait of Hormuz. While there are mitigating things that can be done in the event that the straits were closed off again, the impact would be significant. As he knows, a great deal of Europe's liquefied natural gas comes from the Gulf. Inevitably, after a fairly short space of time, there would be severe economic penalties. Above all, of course, we are concerned about the human cost of another conflict, which has, sadly, been seen too much in this region over the past few years. That is why the most important thing to do is to turn down the heat. He refers very kindly to my measured and well-chosen words. It is important for all concerned to prevail on those who are principals in this matter to engage in talk rather than the alternative, which would be massively expensive for all concerned.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): While the independent investigations that the Minister has mentioned continue—we all want to see the results of those—the fact is that six vessels have been attacked in just over a month. It has been suggested that one practical step that could be taken is to provide some kind of security escort for vessels in the Gulf of Oman and passing through the strait of Hormuz. I very much support what he said about the need to de-escalate tension. In his reply to a previous question, was he trying to indicate to the House that he thought that such a step might actually make matters worse rather than better? I endorse what he said about this ultimately having to be solved by negotiation. Ultimately, the United States of America and Iran will need to get round a table to sort out the difficulties that currently involve both of them.

Dr Murrison: The right hon. Gentleman is of course correct—ultimately, that is where the solution to this lies.

The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to consider escorts of some sort through the strait of Hormuz. It is not our judgment at the moment that that would be appropriate. I think it would be seen as provocative and escalatory. My view—the Government's view—is that our interests are best served at this time by trying to turn down the heat on this, and that is what we will continue to do. But clearly we keep all these things under review.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am very grateful for the tone that my right hon. Friend is adopting on this. It is absolutely the right tone to take with a country that has been extremely challenging not just to us but to many countries in the region. Has he reached out to other countries, because it is not just the UK, or Europe, that relies on energy supplies from the

[Tom Tugendhat]

Persian Gulf, but China and India? How has the interaction been with their embassies and in our relationships with those countries in making sure that this is de-escalated?

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Of course we have a dialogue on these matters and many others—particularly with the E3, as I said. He will know that the Japanese and the Germans very recently paid a high-level visit to Tehran. Clearly, they are among our interlocutors. The Foreign Secretary spoke to Secretary Pompeo yesterday to discuss all these measures. We are going to have to continue that dialogue; clearly, we cannot act alone. But my general sense among our European interlocutors at the moment is that we are on the right track and that they desire to see us de-escalate this matter so that a problem does not become a full-blown crisis.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Minister has said in response to several questions that he does not want to be drawn further on intelligence. Will he arrange a briefing for Privy Counsellors from across the House with the appropriate officials, to tell us what the Government know about this incident and what they do not yet know or cannot be sure about?

Dr Murrison: All I can do is reiterate the point I have made, which is that we do not comment on security matters. The right hon. Gentleman will have to take my assurances that we have made our own independent assessment of this. He will recognise, since he is wise in the ways of these things, that I have chosen my words very carefully. While it is rare for intelligence operators to be categorical in the advice they give to Ministers, they have been as clear as they can be, based on the evidence they have provided, that the provenance of the latest attack is very clear. I hope he will understand what I mean. I do not think there would be any great virtue in the course of action he described.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): We have heard an assessment that all the major players in this situation, including Iran, do not want to see it escalate into a war. Does my right hon. Friend agree with that assessment?

Dr Murrison: I do, as a matter of fact. I think there is very little for Iran in provoking a conflict. The consequences for Iran would be severe. The consequences for the regime would be severe and unpredictable. I feel strongly that, although Iran clearly wishes to ensure that it is given the respect and dignity it deserves, it has no interest in causing a war in the Gulf region.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The Minister rightly referred to a pattern of behaviour by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Hezbollah and Houthi proxy allies. Could it be that the Iranian regime, or elements within it, wish to push up the world oil price at this time because their oil production is falling drastically and because of their internal economic crisis? Would it not be wiser to listen to our own intelligence services, rather than the Leader of the Opposition, who was in the pay of Iranian state propaganda channel Press TV for many years?

Dr Murrison: I can certainly agree with the latter point; that is not a difficult question for me to answer in the affirmative. I listen closely to our own intelligence sources. I have never knowingly listened to the Leader of the Opposition, although I will say this about him: he is at least consistent—he has that virtue, and it is a big virtue for a politician. He has been doing and saying the same things for as long as I can remember, and he never misses an opportunity to support those who mean our country ill or attack our values. That is pretty well understood across the House.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The Government's assessment has concluded that the attacks of 13 June were almost certainly the work of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which operates effectively as a state within a state and which in April was designated a foreign terrorist organisation by the United States. My right hon. Friend has made it clear that the Government's approach is to seek to de-escalate the situation, but can he confirm that his office will keep under careful review the actions of the IRGC and keep Britain's options open as to whether this country should also designate the IRGC a terrorist organisation?

Dr Murrison: Our intent is to de-escalate the situation, and I do not think it would be helpful to do anything that ran contrary to that. As I suspect my right hon. Friend knows, it is not the Government's policy to lay before the House the organisations that they may or may not be considering for proscription.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): I have listened carefully to the Minister, and I completely agree with him that the Iranian dictatorship is a source of much of the conflict in the region, sponsoring organisations such as the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza and prolonging a brutal civil war in Syria through its support for Assad. Why does he think that so many people always seem to demand more evidence about allegations against Iran or Russia, but rush to condemn America or Israel without any questions at all—like, for example, the Leader of the Opposition, who the Minister rightly said had taken £20,000 from the official state broadcaster of the fascistic Iranian regime?

Dr Murrison: I gather from the harrumphing from those on the Opposition Front Bench that my de-escalatory attempts were not terribly helpful; clearly it ruffled some feathers, and I understand that. The hon. Gentleman's remarks are on the record. I do not diverge from him at all, and I hope that those on the Opposition Front Bench were listening.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I thank the right hon. and wise doctor for his measured response. Does he agree that the *raison d'être* of Iran is exporting revolution throughout the region and further afield? The hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) mentioned the militias aligned to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in places such as Lebanon, where they are trying to destroy the state institutions of that small country, which is utterly negative and appalling. What is obviously needed is fundamental change in the Iranian regime. How do the Minister and his colleagues believe that that will be brought about?

Dr Murrison: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We need to be clear about the nature of the regime in Tehran, but we have to deal with lots of regimes across the world, and our best interests are served by talking to them and having a relationship with them. We will agree with them, as it happens, on a number of things—that is for sure—but behaviour of the sort that he has outlined is completely unacceptable. It destabilises the region. It has pushed a number of countries into complete chaos, and it must stop. The future for a great country like Iran is very bright indeed. It is a rich country—potentially extremely rich—and for its people, I would say: for goodness' sake, let us have a brighter future and start to turn this down and improve our relationships. We will never agree on everything, I suspect, but we need to look forward to a much brighter future. That will not happen for as long as the regime in Tehran continues to sponsor the proxies that he referred to.

Mr Speaker: For the Minister to be commended for his honour was doubtless welcome. To be congratulated also upon his wisdom is doubtless positively exhilarating, and I feel sure that today—at least for now—his cup runneth over in appreciation of his hon. Friend.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It won't last.

Mr Speaker: I am sure it will.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): These attacks are to be condemned, and I commend the Minister for his cool words. There is, of course, the prospect of other drums beginning to beat, which is ominous. Surely our influence should be used to urge the US and Iran to re-engage in talks, rather than risk a crescendo of warmongering. Will he consider whether an international inquiry into these attacks and the wider question of safety of shipping in the Gulf would be more productive, given that it has an international effect?

Dr Murrison: There is an investigation under way already in relation to the attacks of 12 May, and I have referred to that. It is principally the responsibility of the UAE, since that happened within UAE territorial waters. This happened in international waters, and the vessels concerned are heading for the UAE. It is for the ship owners to determine how they wish to investigate the damage done to their vessels. However, we stand ready, with others, to be of assistance wherever we can in these matters. As the right hon. Lady will probably appreciate, we have some expertise in matters of this sort, being a maritime nation, and if any of those skillsets can be of assistance, we will obviously be prepared to offer them.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): So what does the wise doctor think their motive was?

Dr Murrison: I am not sure I am prepared to second-guess the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. My right hon. Friend is a very wise man—very wise, indeed—and he has a lot of experience in these matters, and no doubt he has his own views on the motive behind this attack. I think the important thing is that, whatever the motive, we just need to prevail on Tehran to turn the temperature down on this. I hope very much that we can encourage, procure and broker dialogue that will enable us to deal with this in a pacific way that does not involve further escalation, which is in nobody's interests.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Mr Speaker, you have heard from across the House that there is complete agreement with the Minister's desire for de-escalation on this, so is it not extraordinarily irresponsible for anyone in a position of responsibility to suggest that there is in some way a moral equivalence between our greatest ally, the United States of America, and the Islamic Republic, which we know is the greatest exporter of terror and, as the Minister says, is almost certainly responsible for this? To go as far as to suggest that this has in some way been caused by the Americans setting out bait, and that the only fault of the Iranians has been to take the bait left by the Americans, shows that anyone who espouses these views is simply not fit for high office in this country.

Dr Murrison: I do not want to intrude on private grief, but I hope the hon. Gentleman's remarks have been heard by the leader of his party and those on his party's Front Bench.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My wise right hon. Friend on the Front Bench is a distinguished man of science, and he has concluded from the evidence that the IRGC is responsible for these attacks on shipping in international waters. At the same time, Iran has announced that it will breach its obligations under the nuclear deal in 10 days' time. Given that evidence, what further proof does my right hon. Friend require before we take stringent sanctions against the IRGC and against Iran?

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that. I hope he has sensed from my remarks that the intent is to de-escalate this. I make no apologies for the repeated use of that word “de-escalation”. The sanctions he has referred to—of course, sanctions are always on the table—would certainly escalate this and, in our judgment at this juncture, would make a bad situation worse. However, we of course keep all things under review.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): These are obviously very serious moments. What assessment has been made of the potential impact on the UK, and indeed all our constituents, in terms of fuel supplies in the event that this disruption in and around the strait of Hormuz is serious and sustained?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to raise this. I have referred to a fifth of the world's oil going through those straits, to Qatari LNG that powers up much of Europe and to the effect, potentially, on our constituents' fuel bills. He may be aware that we have about 90 days of contingency through the International Energy Agency, but of course we do not really want to use that. We want those straits to remain open for the world's trade, and we will do everything we can to ensure that they do.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I have been on the record in this Chamber many times saying that I am opposed to any territorial military action against Iran. I think that would be a complete and utter escalation beyond anything we would actually be able to control or make stay in place. I have listened very carefully to my right hon. Friend about Britain standing prepared to give assistance, especially in naval matters, and we are of course talking about international waters.

[Alec Shelbrooke]

I understand his not wanting to send Royal Navy vessels there at this time to provide support, but may I ask my him whether any conversations are taking place with international bodies such as the UN about being prepared, if need be, to offer protection to international shipping in international waters, which of course are nothing to do with the territorial areas of Iran? Indeed, if Iran were telling the truth in saying that it was not involved, it would not have any objection to international escorts for international vessels.

Dr Murrison: I am not sure that Iran would quite see it that way, and that is very important because we do need to try to turn down the temperature on this. The straight answer is that we do not propose, as things stand at the moment, to escort vessels through the strait of Hormuz. We do not feel that is necessary, based on what we know, and we feel that it would be escalatory, so there are no plans to do such a thing. However, we clearly have to keep a close eye on this situation, and in the event that there is a deterioration in the situation, we have to consider adopting a new posture. I hope very much that will not be necessary.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What assessment has the Minister made of the ongoing impact on the Iranian economy of US sanctions?

Dr Murrison: The answer is that the sanctions are significant and, to a large extent, have influenced the behaviour of Tehran. I hope that we can work towards a future where those sanctions will not be necessary. In the long term, the lifting of sanctions is important to restore Iran to the international community of nations. However, there is no point in disguising the significance of the sanctions that have been imposed. I hope, through the E3 and others, such as the JCPOA and the special purpose vehicle INSTEX—the instrument in support of trade exchanges—that we will be capable, or able, at least to hold open some channel of communication with Iran to give it the sense that it is not completely isolated from the international community. If it is, I fear it is going to be far more difficult to restore Iran to the international community to which I have referred.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): The recent attacks on the Norwegian and Japanese-owned oil tankers will no doubt resonate around the world. I welcome the Minister's dialled-down and calm approach to this very sensitive matter, and I am sure that is shared by all Members in the Chamber today. Is he able to advise on what can be done to ensure the protection of the global crude oil supply, and of the vessels and crews, irrespective of which flag they sail under?

Dr Murrison: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I come back to my theme, I suppose, which is that the way to deal with this is to de-escalate the situation. If we do that, we protect those vessels in the Gulf and in international waters, and we protect individuals—both our own nationals and others—in the wider region.

Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have considered the Bill, and I have concluded that it does not meet the criteria for EVEL—that is to say, English votes for England laws—certification.

To move the Second Reading, I call not any Minister, but a particular Minister, a perspicacious Minister, a dedicated Minister and, I know, a Minister in a hurry—Rishi Sunak.

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This Bill makes a major improvement to the rating system that delivers on Government commitments and addresses ratepayers' concerns. It will ensure that business rates bills will be updated at more frequent revaluations to reflect changes to the rental property market. In doing so, it will ensure that business rates become more responsive to economic changes.

Business representatives such as the CBI, the British Property Federation and the British Chambers of Commerce have all asked for more frequent revaluations. They were promised that by the Chancellor at autumn Budget 2017 and again at the 2018 spring statement. This Bill delivers on those promises.

Business rates bills are based on the rateable value of the property, which, broadly speaking, represents its annual rental value. The rateable value is therefore the tax base for business rates and it is assessed by the Valuation Office Agency, independently of Ministers.

Since the current system of business rates was introduced in 1990, the Government have had regular revaluations of rateable values, to ensure that they remain up to date. These revaluations ensure that the amount paid in business rates—money used to fund important local services—is distributed fairly among all ratepayers, having regard to their rental value.

Regular revaluations are an important part of maintaining fairness in the system, but the Government must strike a balance between the uncertainty created by regular revaluations—because it is inevitable that rate bills will change at that time—and the stability of businesses being able to plan for the future.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister just made an important point about the fact that revaluations are there to ensure fairness in the system. On that basis, does not council tax completely fail the test? If the Minister really wanted to go down in history, would it not be more appropriate to have a non-domestic rating and council tax valuation Bill?

Rishi Sunak: I am not sure I would like to go down in history as the man who revalued people's homes to tax them more. The Chair of the Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government makes a fair point, but the difference is that the statutory basis for business rates requires that the overall revenue raised remains neutral in real terms, taking account of appeals and increases, so it is necessary to ensure that that happens in practice. As a result of doing that every five years since 1990, the Government have enacted a revaluation.

Following the 2010 revaluation, and in the face of the economic downturn, the planned 2015 revaluation was postponed to 2017. That reflected the need at that difficult time to give businesses more certainty. Quite rightly, however, it also led to renewed interest in business as to how often we should in the future revalue for business rates.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I will not be as mischievous as the Chairman of the Select Committee, but there is an issue that needs to be dealt with. Various Treasury and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government reforms have resulted in many reliefs and opportunities for people to run small businesses without having to pay any business rates at all. Is it not time for a fundamental review of business taxation, to make it fair and reasonable and to ensure that those people who operate online also pay their fair share of business taxation, rather than relying on those businesses that happen to be in situ?

Rishi Sunak: I feel like I am being pincered by the illustrious senior members of the Select Committee. Of course, the issue of business rates vexes many people, but my hon. Friend is right to point out that, because of the various reliefs enacted by this Government, it is the case that fully one third of all businesses pay no business rates at all, and that is to be welcomed.

Notwithstanding the fact that I would be straying far from my brief and treading on the Chancellor's toes if I addressed the broader structure of business rates taxation, it is worth saying that when the Treasury last looked at the issue a few years ago, there was no consensus among the business community about what might replace it. On digital taxes in general, although it is not quite the same, the digital services tax mooted by the Chancellor goes in part towards addressing the issue raised by my hon. Friend.

To return to the Bill, the response of businesses to the consultations and engagements was very clear: they thought that the revaluation cycle should be shortened, and the most popular option emerged as three years. Therefore, this Bill makes three changes to the rating system in England.

First, the Bill will bring forward the date from which the next revaluation takes effect, from 1 April 2022 to 1 April 2021. Secondly, the Bill will ensure that, thereafter, revaluations will take effect every three years, so the next revaluation after that will be in 2024, and so on. Thirdly, the Bill will change the last date by which draft rateable values must be published in the lead-up to the revaluation, from the preceding 30 September to 31 December. That period, during which new rateable values are published before the list comes into force, is known as the draft rating list.

Business rates is a devolved policy area, but the Bill also applies in part to Wales. As in England, the next revaluation in Wales will be brought forward to 1 April 2021. I understand that the Welsh Government are considering options for the frequency and nature of revaluations thereafter, so the requirement for three-yearly revaluations does not yet apply in Wales. Entirely different legislation applies in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but I understand that both countries are committed to having more frequent revaluations.

Hon. Members who have been following the proceedings of the Select Committee on the Treasury inquiry into the impact of business rates will have seen a range of business groups support the move to more frequent revaluations. I will end with a quote from the evidence provided by the Association of Convenience Stores:

“More frequent revaluations will allow rateable values to link more closely with the non-domestic property market and three-yearly revaluations strike the balance between VOA resource and accuracy for business.”

In conclusion, I am very glad to be able to make this improvement to the rating system, and I commend the Bill to the House.

6.46 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): First, may I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests? I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association. We are very supportive of more frequent revaluations. There are growing calls to make sure that that happens, not only to ensure their relevance but to remove any potential sharp cliff edges—the longer a revaluation is left, the more the valuations between regions drift.

The LGA, though, would like the Government to go further, and asks them specifically to reduce the significant backlog of appeals: there are a staggering 65,000 unresolved appeals from 2010 in the system. That is important because local councils have to have £2.5 billion in reserves, in case those appeals are successful and the risk is carried by council services. The LGA also asks for the appeal period to be capped at six months. Again, that would reduce the financial exposure for which local authorities would have to make provision through their reserves. The LGA believes that that would be more appropriate.

We must consider the impact of revaluations with regard not only to the changing nature of demand—including for retail, office and other types of uses—but to the geographical shift away from our regions to London and the south-east, as shown by the most recent revaluation. The net take for the Treasury has to be broadly the same, and the revaluation reflects the increase in value in London and the reduction in the regions.

In the 2017 revaluation, it was only London that experienced an increase in all values across all sectors: retail was up by 26.2%, industry by 15.1%, office by 21.2%, and other uses by 25.7%. Every other region, bar the south-east, experienced a reduction in retail values, including by 1.2% in the west midlands and by 6.8% in the north-east. Although office values were more mixed, Yorkshire and the Humber experienced a decrease in value of 13.25%, followed by the north-east, which was down by 12.5%. A real shift is taking place away from our regions, primarily in the north, towards London and the south-east.

Let me paint what that picture means in pounds and pence, because that is what the Treasury cares about when it comes to business rates. The square mile of the City of London alone is now valued higher than the whole of Wales. Westminster City Council and Camden Council together are worth more than the whole of the north-west of England. Greater Manchester alone is valued higher than the whole of the north-east of England.

[*Jim McMahon*]

We are seeing major shifts in values across the country, focusing not just on the capital but on the city bases away from our towns.

Why is that important? As more local authorities move towards business rate retention schemes, all with varying degrees of retention and because of that different degrees of exposure, there will be an impact on those with 100% retention in particular. Councils will be asking—following the next revaluation in 2021, should the Bill go through—what safety net will be in place to ensure that councils with perhaps weaker economic bases are not disadvantaged because they have opted into a business rate scheme. That is not because they have not been working hard to drive their local base—many have been doing that, which is why they went into the scheme in the first place—but because the nature of demand in those places has changed so much.

In Committee, when we have a bit of time to secure evidence to test some of these ideas out, I hope there will be a spirit of wanting to work together to try to make the system work. We have heard some pushing demands from Members who, quite rightly, recognise that council tax and business rates are both very important property taxes which also have limitations. It is important that both are sustainable and fair on the payers.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Gentleman provides an analysis, which I recognise, of the changes that took place during the previous revaluation. He also says that there is an opportunity for local authorities to grow their economic base. Has he done any economic analysis of how successful those areas of the country that have seen a greater fall in their valuations have been in attracting businesses, in particular where public services and Government Departments have been devolved to those areas, which can increase the economic basis of those local authorities?

Jim McMahon: We have done that analysis. We have spoken to local authorities that are part of the retention scheme and where they have managed to capture the uplift in growth of values. I should say, however, that in combined authority areas and city regions, where we take the locality in the round we are seeing a shift away from towns to cities. The cities are performing very well and we are seeing stability in the retail and office markets, but we are not seeing the same repeated in the neighbouring towns that can be only a mile or two up the road. In terms of net gain, a lot of them will have to bring forward their strategic plans to ensure they are developing enough big employment sites, because it will eventually come down to square footage as we see the nature of it shift.

Let us be honest: we are talking about an online sales tax. The Government have really resisted that. There are some legitimate reasons to be cautious, particularly in terms of EU legislation and what that might mean for a potential challenge, but the fact is that we have not addressed, even within the business rate regime, how completely unfair it is for the high street anchor store—John Lewis, Debenhams and so on—which brings in footfall into town centres and supports the other retailers. The Amazon big shed on the edge of the motorway pays a fraction of the business rates to occupy that space,

when it is actually a more productive space direct to the consumer. There is a lot of room to go here, not just to rely on an internet sales tax, but to get around a table, work through the detail cross-party and really test what areas are not controversial. Most people who understand this recognise that the system has to catch up with the changing times. That offer has been on the table for a while and perhaps one day it will be taken up.

6.53 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am the vice-president of the Local Government Association.

I do not want to keep the Minister too long from his exciting bedtime reading, which he was telling us about in questions earlier. In principle, I accept what the Bill tries to do and I think it is a sensible move. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has conducted an inquiry into business rate retention and, more recently, the high street. The view generally has been that business rates should be revalued more often and that three years is a reasonable compromise. Five years is too long, because we get major changes in rating values that we then have to catch up with, and we then have dampening mechanisms, appeals and so on. Any more frequently would be too much change too quickly, so three years is a reasonable compromise on which I think there is general agreement.

I hope the Government really mean it and that we will have three years. In 2015, when we had five years, the valuation was postponed for two years. Why? It was because we were going to have a general election in 2015. That was the reason and everyone knows it. That meant seven years between revaluations, which created an even bigger problem with even bigger changes and a lot more difficulties, from which we are still suffering.

Are there any implications for the business rate retention scheme? Presumably, the Government are still going ahead with the 75% figure. Is it going ahead from next year? We are still not quite sure, in these changed circumstances. Will it have any impact particularly on the issue of resets within the system? Presumably not, particularly if a rolling reset is done. I presume that would be covered and would not be affected, but it would be helpful to have reassurance on that.

I echo the point made by my friend the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). All the evidence we have heard, in our high street inquiry and the business rate retention inquiry—I am currently a guest on the Treasury Committee inquiry into business rates—shows that we just cannot carry on not recognising the change of circumstances, particularly with regard to the high street and 20% of sales now being done online, which is the highest percentage anywhere in the world. At some point, the system will have to change. Amyas Morse, the then Comptroller and Auditor General, made the point to the Committee that simply having a system based on another age and on floor space was taking no account of the changes happening now in modern society. That was not sustainable in the long term and there had to be change.

There could be a complete comprehensive review, moving to a completely different system of raising money from businesses. That is one way. I still think it is hard to avoid taxation on physical buildings and that

they are probably a good basis for a system, but there has to be some reform and some addition. The Select Committee's inquiry into the high street recommended that we look at a number of alternatives, including the potential for an online sales tax. That would take the pressure off those elements of business, particularly high street shops, which are most under pressure. That still needs to be looked at.

Finally, appeals are still a problem. We hear that local authorities are holding reserves for very obvious reasons. We have changed the system and we now have a check and challenge. We have been told that it is discouraging businesses from appealing, so there is that disadvantage, compared with having lots of appeals that were bogging down the system. Fundamentally, the evidence showed that the valuation office is understaffed and under-resourced to deal with appeals. That came up in the Treasury Committee inquiry. I hope Ministers will look at that.

Whatever system we have, there has to be a proper appeals system that works expeditiously for the benefit of the appellant and local authorities. A number of issues still need to be considered, but the principle behind this small Bill is a good one that should be supported.

6.57 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I am extremely grateful for the very incisive comments and questions to the Minister by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

Labour supports this reform, not least because it is a part of our five-point plan for our high streets. Labour pledged in February 2017 to introduce more regular revaluations, coupled with simplifications in the business rate system. It is to be welcomed that the Government are at last finally getting on board with this essential reform, but the entire business rate system is in desperate need of comprehensive review. The Government's consultation on the introduction of more frequent revaluations noted some challenges that are yet to be addressed, including: the increased workload resulting from this reform and the need for significantly skilled staff to undertake this work; and the possibility that the move will result in more appeals by ratepayers, placing additional pressure on the Valuation Office Agency.

According to the latest valuation tribunal statistics, there are still 65,000 unsolved 2010 appeals and councils have had to divert over £2.5 billion from services to deal with the appeals risk. How do the Government intend to deal with that? The explanatory notes state that the Bill's provisions "may lead" to the Treasury providing additional funding to the VOA, but it does not guarantee to do so, even though additional valuations and perhaps more appeals arising from them will be required.

While we welcome the changes in the Bill, we cannot settle for this tinkering around the edges while the nation's high street retailers are struggling so much. Nationwide, every type of retail premises—high streets, retail parks and 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 2018 and almost 5% of that vacant space has been empty for over two years, which demonstrates the scale of the challenge.

The Confederation of British Industry has warned that the current business rates system is entrenching regional inequalities:

"The lag between the area's boom in property prices and its latest business rates revaluation has seen firms suddenly having to cope with an almost 50% increase in their bill."

On the other hand, areas that have suffered from economic downturn, where major industries have left in recent years, have continued to require firms to pay higher business rates. It can also mean that local authorities are underfunded where businesses are on the rise.

These regional inequalities are entrenched by the business rates system in areas that have already had their finances worsened by the Government's continuing austerity policies. Between 2010 and 2019, Knowsley, the second most deprived area in the country, saw a spending power cut of £1,406 per household. This is simply a disgrace.

Last month, the UK2070 Commission published research showing that the inequalities that blight economic performance and life chances in parts of the UK are likely significantly to worsen, with London "decoupling" from the rest of the UK unless drastic action is taken. The chair of the commission said that what the Government are doing is just a sticking plaster and that it is "too small, short-lived or disjointed to have a lasting impact."

When will the Government listen to business and deliver a wholesale review of the system? When, too, will they address the threats to retailers posed by their online competitors and ensure that businesses with physical shops are not at a disadvantage under the business rates system?

We look forward to the Government pressing on further with reform of the business rates system and to hearing what the Minister has to say.

7.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler):

It is an absolute pleasure to give the closing speech to this part of today's business. The Bill may be narrow and technical in scope, but in practice it will improve the rating system for all ratepayers. It is the culmination of discussion with businesses about how we can improve the rating system. They wanted more frequent revaluations and that is what we are delivering.

I do not need to tell the House how quickly the commercial property market can change. Trends in sectors, locations and types of property can drive changes in the rents paid by businesses. Currently, the rating system picks up on those changes only every five years. Businesses have told us that five years is too much of a lag in the rating system before rateable values can catch up with rents. It results in ratepayers paying rates based on a rateable value that may no longer reflect their rent. That is why businesses want more frequent revaluations and why we are delivering precisely that with this technical Bill.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I very much welcome the Bill. Will the Minister comment on one aspect that is not covered by the detail of it, but which is very important to people in my constituency who own riding stables and particularly those who provide riding services for the disabled as well as commercial riding stables? We often find that the Valuation Office Agency simply does

[Jeremy Lefroy]

not have the expertise to deliver an accurate valuation for that kind of very specialist activity, where there is not really a rental market.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The last time this matter was raised, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) facilitated meetings between the professional groups and the people involved. There were ongoing discussions that became very fruitful.

The Bill will ensure that rateable values and therefore business rate bills are more responsive to changes in the rental market. It requires revaluations after 2021 to take place every three years and I am delighted that Opposition Front Benchers have accepted that. Some businesses have asked us to go further and move to annual revaluations, but we are delighted to have peace reigning in the Chamber today.

Let me try to answer the question about business rate retention from the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. The revaluation does not affect councils' local income, as there are adjustments to make sure that that is dealt with. As regards resourcing the VOA, that will form part of the spending review later this year.

Mr Betts: The Minister made a commitment that this will be reviewed later this year as part of the spending review. Does that mean that the spending review is going ahead this year?

Mrs Wheeler: Very sadly, apparently I am not running to be leader of the Conservative party—[HON. MEMBERS: "Shame!"] How kind! It is subject to that.

The Bill brings forward the next revaluation to 2021 but ratepayers do not have to wait two years to benefit from our reforms to the rating system. Ratepayers are now benefiting from a multiplier linked to CPI rather than RPI and from a small business rate relief scheme that has removed 655,000 small businesses from rating. They are benefiting from a retail discount of one third off small and medium retail properties. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (LISTS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill:

Committal

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

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

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (LISTS) BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (LISTS) BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill, it is expedient to authorise provision for, or in connection with, changing the dates on which non-domestic rating lists must be compiled.—(*Amanda Milling.*)

Question agreed to.

Local Housing Allowance: Nottingham

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

7.8 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): It is just over nine years since I became the Member of Parliament for Nottingham South and in that time, I have secured a number of debates on housing and homelessness. I wish I could say that my contributions had led to an improvement in the situation for some of my constituency's most vulnerable citizens, but I am afraid that things have got worse, rather than better. I suggest that every one of us here will have witnessed a sharp rise in the most visible form of homelessness: rough sleeping.

Back in 2010, the official count for rough sleepers in Nottingham was three. I first raised the issue in Parliament in December 2011, because it had risen sixfold in a year. Andrew Redfern, the chief executive of local homelessness charity, Framework, was warning that cuts to services and welfare changes were undermining years of success in tackling homelessness. Earlier this year, the number of rough sleepers in Nottingham reached a record high of 55. In eight years it was no better; it was much, much worse.

In March 2013, I secured an Adjournment debate on the under-occupancy penalty. Despite the best efforts of the coalition Government, the official title never stuck, and we all know it as the bedroom tax. That measure left 6,000 of our city's poorest households with "nowhere to go" as the *Nottingham Post* put it.

In March 2015, I led a Westminster Hall debate on affordable housing, and in 2018 I used another Adjournment debate to highlight an Opportunity Nottingham report into persistent rough sleeping. The thing I find most shocking, looking back on those debates, is that on each occasion I was drawing attention to the problems faced by people in the city I represent, not as a result of lack of effort or even just bad luck, but as a direct result of Government policy. What is most shameful is that on each occasion Ministers were warned that their policies would cause hardship, poverty and debt but pursued them anyway.

Last week, the Minister assured us that he wanted everyone to have security in their home and a roof over their head. I hope that he is serious, because if he is, he will not want to continue with policies that he knows will make the lives of people in my city and this country harder and poorer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady and I came into the House at the same time, in 2010, and these are issues that we are both very interested in. Does she agree that it is nigh impossible for people to find a private rented property within the LHA even in what are often known as council estates and that this must be urgently reviewed in areas where the number of houses does not tally with housing need? This causes landlords to push for more to cover their overheads, to the detriment of our vulnerable constituents on housing benefit living on the breadline and having to make up the difference.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman pre-empted much of my speech, but he is entirely right.

Today's debate was prompted by research undertaken by Hannah Clemson, policy and communications officer at Advice Nottingham, into the availability and affordability of private rented accommodation in Nottingham city, specifically property within the local housing allowance rate. Advice Nottingham is a consortium of six advice agencies based in Nottingham and providing free, confidential and impartial advice on a range of issues, including benefit, debt, employment and housing. They do an incredible job supporting people who are often in desperate circumstances, and I am glad to have the opportunity to put on the record my thanks to them for the work they do.

The availability of affordable homes to rent is clearly an issue of importance to many of my constituents in Nottingham, but it is not only an issue in our city. This debate is particularly timely, given last Thursday's urgent question on the Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Samuels v. Birmingham City Council* led by my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). That case highlighted the impact of the growing gap between actual rents and the amount of rent covered by local housing allowance, following the Government's decision to freeze LHA rates from April 2016.

Analysis by Shelter has revealed that there is now a shortfall between LHA rents at the 30th percentile in 97% of broad market rental areas in England. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, people cannot find affordable rents, and that is true almost everywhere in this country. Nottingham is one such area, where the freeze on local housing allowance is leaving people homeless and in poverty. Many of my constituents simply cannot afford a home in the private rented sector, yet that is the only choice they have. The Government's outdated LHA rates from 2016 show rents in Nottingham to be as low as £42.54 per week. In reality, Advice Nottingham has found the cheapest property is now at least £63 per week.

Advice Nottingham knew that LHA was not meeting local needs from the work it did with its clients. It knew that rents were too high and that local people were struggling to find affordable accommodation, but it decided to do its own research to find out exactly how many properties were available in the city within the LHA rates. It undertook this research last November within a one-week period. Using Rightmove, Zoopla and Gumtree, it searched the city to find properties. It found only 12 properties at or below the rate for shared accommodation, and many of those were specifically marketed as student properties—I will explain the significance of that later in my speech. It found just five one-bedroom flats in the city at or below the LHA rate. Family homes proved even harder to find: there were only two two-bedroom properties at or below LHA rate; three three-bedroom properties; and one four-bedroom house, in the whole of the city, at a rent covered by LHA.

More recent work by Nottingham City Council confirms Advice Nottingham's findings. The LHA rate is intended to reflect the bottom 30th percentile of local rents, but it found that it actually covered less than 7% of one-bedroom flats, less than 3% of two-bedroom properties and less than 5% of three-bedroom homes. With a shortage of council or housing association properties available, many families are forced to rent properties that they cannot really afford, forgoing other essential household expenditure, including food, heating and clothing, simply to put a roof over their heads.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): As usual, my hon. Friend is making a passionate case for our city. The bedroom tax was cruel because even if an individual complied with what the Government were trying to coerce them to do, there was not the housing there for them to go to, and we are seeing that repeated with the LHA. She correctly highlights the gap that people must make up just to get a roof over their head. Does she share my concern that my constituents in the north of the city, like hers in the south, are going without essentials—food, heating, things for their children—just to maintain these tenancies and that that is a sign of a system that fundamentally is not working?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I will seek to explain precisely the problem our constituents are facing. The problem is that the gap they are seeking to fill between the LHA they receive and the rent they need to pay is not trivial but significant. According to Shelter, the gap between 30th percentile rents and the LHA rate in Nottingham is £15.17 a month for a room in a shared house; £55.01 for a one-bedroom flat; £54.57 for a two-bedroom property; £56.61 for a three-bedroom property; and £121.93 per month for a four-bedroom house. These are not trivial amounts. Trying to cover the shortfall is leaving people in a very vulnerable and insecure position and, as my hon. Friend has said, in poverty.

Jim Shannon: I am sure the hon. Lady, like others, will know from her constituency experience that whenever people's income is reduced because of rental accommodation or benefit changes, more often than not they are pushed towards food banks. In my constituency, the Thriving Life food bank has been extremely busy due to benefit changes, rental accommodation not being available and being unable to pay the money. As a result, they are falling back on food banks—which we are very glad to have, by the way—with dismaying regularity.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point, and I cannot imagine how many people would get by without food banks, but some people will not go to a food bank—perhaps because they are too proud—and so will be going hungry, sitting in a cold house because they have not turned the heating on or sending their children to school in clothing that is too small or simply not appropriate. I have heard of children going to school in their pyjamas because they do not have proper clothing. It is shameful.

Martyn Neal, a senior adviser at the Meadows Advice Group, spoke to Advice Nottingham's researcher about his experiences trying to support clients with local housing allowance. He described meeting two clients, one already homeless and one threatened with homelessness. The housing plans given by Housing Aid were almost identical and contained instructions to the client to look for affordable accommodation in the private sector. The LHA was quoted as a guide to affordability, but absolutely no other guidance was given about how the client should go about this or what difficulties, if any, they would likely encounter. No other support was offered, at least for the next few weeks.

Both Martyn's clients were or had been living in the Meadows area of Nottingham and understandably preferred to remain local to be near schools for their children. Martyn says:

“Under the LHA, both clients were entitled to a three-bedroom home. I logged onto Rightmove and using a 3-mile radius as a

start, which would fit in with school transport rules, I began my search. There was not a single property available for rent less than £50.00 a month above the local housing allowance.

I extended the radius to 5 miles, which revealed one property, in Bulwell”

—which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris)—

“this met the local housing allowance.”

The Minister may or may not know Nottingham well. Bulwell and the Meadows are at opposite ends of the city, a tram ride or two bus rides away from each other. The journey is time-consuming and costly, especially for a large family.

Sally Denton, from Nottingham Law Centre, has described the problems that she has witnessed. She said:

“In the current rental market where there is a shortage of social housing there is an increased demand on the private sector. This means that landlords can charge more due to the demand.”

She said that tenants

“cannot do anything to challenge the level of rent and cannot move to cheaper accommodation as it does not exist.”

She added:

“We see clients regularly who are struggling to pay for unaffordable rents. If an unexpected expense occurs, or there is a change in income (like the 5-week wait under Universal Credit), people can very easily fall into rent arrears and risk losing their homes.”

Nottingham Law Centre is not alone in identifying this problem. Terry Alafat, the chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Housing, has said:

“Our research makes it clear just how far housing benefit for private renters has failed to keep pace with even the cheapest private rents.

We fear this policy is putting thousands of private renters on low incomes at risk of poverty and homelessness.”

How can the Minister preside over a system that forces people to put themselves at risk of debt and eviction? I am sure that when he responds to the debate he will talk about the Government's targeted affordability funding, but while that is of course welcome, it is nowhere near enough to address the problem. In Nottingham, the targeted affordability funding means that the LHA rate for three and four-bedroom houses has increased by 3% in the last year. The monthly shortfall for an LHA claimant renting a three-bedroom house at the 30th percentile is now £56.61 rather than £60.22, and for a four-bedroom house it is £121.59 rather than £126.14. Yes, that is an improvement, but does the Minister really think that it is sufficient?

While the freezing of LHA rates is creating this issue, a much bigger problem is the lack of affordable housing. Since 1980 Nottingham has lost 22,010 social homes through Right to Buy, and although Nottingham City Council, Nottingham City Homes and other local housing associations have built new homes, there are nowhere near enough to make up for those that have been lost. Indeed, the problem has accelerated since discounts were increased in 2012. In the last year there were 664 applications to Nottingham City Council for Right to Buy, whereas 134 homes were bought in 2012-13. There is a huge gap between the demand for and the supply of social housing. Nottingham City Homes made 1,431 new lets in the last year, but the housing register stood at 8,393.

Of course, some of those on the housing register are in permanent accommodation, but I know from my constituency casework that too many are inadequately

housed, such as young families living with their parents in overcrowded conditions or in properties that are unsuitable for their needs—perhaps forced to live in high-rise housing. According to a survey carried out by Inside Housing in 2017, nearly 40% of council homes sold under Right to Buy have been resold and are being let in the private rented sector, at higher rents and, even with LHA restrictions, at a higher cost to the taxpayer. What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about this ludicrous situation?

I am proud to represent a vibrant and extremely popular university city, but the rise in the city's student population has also contributed to the lack of affordable family housing. Landlords have sought to capitalise on the student market by converting family homes into highly profitable shared accommodation. That increase in the number of houses in multiple occupation does not even help the under-35s whose LHA rate is restricted to the shared room rate. Many private rented properties in Nottingham are student-only lets. As students make up the majority of tenants, if someone entitled to LHA lived in a student let, the whole cost of the council tax would probably fall on the non-student tenant. Even when there appears to be an abundance of private rented accommodation, much of it is closed off to my constituents who receive LHA.

Unfortunately, however, that is not the only reason property is closed off. Shelter has revealed that many landlords discriminate against people on universal credit, and the position is no different for other LHA claimants. With the cost of renting so high and the rates so low, private landlords are reluctant to let to LHA claimants; 43% bar them completely, while a further 18% prefer not to let to them. What plans do the Government have to ensure that landlords cannot discriminate in that way?

The struggles that my constituents are facing are being replicated across the country. Last week the Supreme Court ruled in favour of Mrs Samuels, a single mum with four children, who was found to be “intentionally homeless” by Birmingham City Council because she did not use the subsistence benefits, intended for essential living costs, to pay the shortfall between her LHA and her rent. Shelter estimates that the majority of LHA households—65%—in private rented accommodation also face a monthly shortfall. Its survey of private renters detailed some of the impossible trade-offs that families receiving LHA are having to make. For example, one in three renters has cut back on food for either themselves or their partner, and 37% have been forced to borrow money to pay their rent in the last year.

This cannot go on, but last week the Minister seemed unwilling to address the issue. Can he tell me what assessment he has made of the hardship suffered by households as a result of the freezing of LHA rates? Does he accept that the freeze has increased homelessness in Nottingham and across the country? Is he really saying that families should be forced to live below the breadline and use subsistence benefits to pay their rent? The Supreme Court ruling in favour of Mrs Samuels set a precedent, and his Department needs to respond urgently.

There is a very clear solution: 92% of local authorities responding to the Local Government Association's LHA survey thought that lifting the freeze on LHA rates, and

better aligning them with rents, would help to reduce homelessness in their areas. The Residential Landlords Association has said:

“The LHA has a ‘double whammy’ effect that is driving homelessness. This double whammy means that; first, tenants in receipt of Housing Benefit are more likely other tenants to have their tenancy ended by their landlord; and, secondly, these households are finding it increasingly difficult to find suitable, affordable accommodation in the private rented sector.”

The Chartered Institute of Housing has said:

“We are calling on the government to conduct an immediate review and to look at ending the freeze on Local Housing Allowance.”

Shelter, the Child Poverty Action Group, and many other housing and homelessness charities are saying the same thing. It is time to act and lift LHA rates, so that housing benefit covers the true cost of renting in the private sector.

The Government have pledged to halve rough sleeping in this Parliament, and to end it by 2027. I'm afraid that that shows a real lack of urgency, but how can I take the commitment seriously when Ministers have repeatedly ignored warnings over the past nine years, and have pursued the very policies that have caused homelessness to rise? They have cut Supporting People funds, changed the basis on which LHA rates are set from the median to the 30th percentile of market rents, restricted people aged 26 to 35 to the shared room rate, introduced the bedroom tax, subjected families to the benefit cap, and restricted and then frozen LHA rates.

I do not hold the Minister responsible for things that happened before he was even a Member of Parliament, but I will hold him accountable for his actions now. Before he became a Minister, he chaired the all-party group on ending homelessness. Now that he is in a position to make a real difference, will he do so?

Matt Downie, director of policy and external affairs at Crisis, said recently:

“Homelessness is not inevitable—there is clear evidence that it can be ended with the right policies in place. The government must urgently reform housing benefits for private renters, so they not only match the true cost of renting but also keep pace with future rent changes.”

Will the Minister end the freeze on local housing allowance, and if so, when? Will he provide additional targeted affordability funding to help those who are struggling to pay their rent right now? Will he ensure that LHA rates are restored to at least the 30th percentile of local rents? Given that this is a housing crisis, will he call on his colleagues at the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to act now to provide more social housing and controls on rent rises? Now that he is in a position to help to end one of the causes of homelessness, will he do the right thing?

7.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I thank the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) for securing this debate. I have not yet had an opportunity to visit Nottingham in my role but I look forward to doing so, hopefully over the summer.

Since taking up my post two months ago, I have been keen to engage with as many people as possible, including key stakeholders such as Shelter, Crisis, Homeless Link and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to understand housing issues from all perspectives. Like the hon. Lady,

[Will Quince]

I have a keen and long-standing interest in housing and ensuring that people have a safe, decent and affordable place to live that meets the needs of the household, and I would like to start by confirming that we have committed to end the freeze on local housing allowance in March 2020.

Reform of housing support was a central part of this Government's plan to create a welfare system that both supports the most vulnerable and is fair to taxpayers. To help ensure a fair balance between these two elements, LHA rates are not intended to meet rents 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 be faced by those claiming benefits, and the LHA policy is designed to achieve this.

Between 2000 and 2010, housing benefit expenditure had risen by over half in real terms, reaching £25 billion in today's prices. If left unreformed, by 2014-15 housing benefit would have reached £29 billion. That was not sustainable.

The measure to freeze LHA rates for four years from April 2016 built on reforms introduced in the previous Parliament, which saved £6 billion in total by 2015-16. Savings from freezing LHA rates are estimated to be around £655 million for Great Britain over the four-year period of the measure. Our reforms provide greater fairness and are part of our wider goal to move people from welfare and into work.

However, we have recognised that some places have seen big increases in rents, so we have made provision to further help people in those areas. That is why we have used a proportion of the savings from the freeze to create more targeted affordability funding, which is used to reduce the gap between frozen LHA rates and the 30th percentile.

Initially, targeted affordability funding was based on 30% of the savings from the freeze, but at autumn Budget 2017 we invested an additional £125 million in targeted affordability funding for the final two years of the freeze—2018-19 and 2019-20. This was based on 50% of the savings rather than 30%.

This additional funding enabled us to increase 213 LHA rates—there are 960 in total—by 3% last year, in 2018-19. This year, a total of £210 million has been made available, the highest amount of targeted affordability funding since its introduction in 2014, enabling us to increase 361 LHA rates by 3%. As a result, it is estimated that this year 500,000 households will benefit from an increase of around £250 per year.

In addition to this targeted affordability funding the Government have provided over £1 billion in discretionary housing payments to local authorities since 2011. Discretionary housing payments allow local authorities to protect the most vulnerable claimants and support households affected by different welfare reforms, including the freeze to LHA rates.

In Nottingham specifically, two of the five LHA rates in the broad market rental area were eligible for targeted affordability funding this year: the three-bedroom and four-bedroom LHA rates, both of which have been increased by 3%.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the Minister for taking an intervention. As he rightly says, the levels for three and four-bedroom properties have been increased. I set out the levels of increase: for example, for a four-bedroom house, it has been increased by £4.55, but that still leaves a shortfall of £1,452 over the year for someone in that position renting that four-bedroom house. The Minister has quoted the rates but the shortfall that people are being asked to make up is huge. Is he really saying that that is the sort of money someone should have to find from their other benefits, whether child benefit or disability benefits? Is that really right?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. That is exactly why we have introduced the targeted affordability funding and we have made available discretionary housing payments, but it is also why more broadly, as I explained in the urgent question last week, I am looking at this in some detail, as I did before being a Minister as part of the all-party group for ending homelessness.

As I said, the three-bedroom and four-bedroom LHA rates in Nottingham have both been increased by 3%. The remaining rates in Nottingham did not fall within the criteria of those rates that had diverged the most from local rents and therefore were not eligible for targeted affordability funding this year, and so remain frozen. As I have said, the Government have committed to end the freeze to LHA rates in March 2020 alongside the freeze on other working-age benefits.

Before I go on, I am aware that the hon. Lady mentioned a few other points which I would like to cover: homelessness, housing supply and "no DSS". I did a huge amount of work, alongside the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), on the causes of homelessness and rough sleeping as co-chair of the all-party group for ending homelessness. Those causes are understood to be both complex and multifaceted. In order to fully evaluate these factors, we have commissioned a feasibility study and a rapid evidence review of the causes of homelessness in partnership with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. This report has now been finalised and we are working on the next steps.

As I said earlier, we want everyone to have security in their homes and a roof over their head, and that is why we have committed over £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. We published a strategy to end rough sleeping by 2027 and halve it by 2022, and that is backed by £100 million of initial funding. And we have changed the law so that councils can place families in private rented accommodation so they get a suitable place sooner. Last year, statutory homelessness acceptances fell, and we are going to build on this; and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 will mean that more people get the help they need sooner.

The hon. Lady rightly touched on landlords not letting to those in receipt of benefits, also known under the old term of "no DSS". This is a hugely important issue, and in February, the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), announced a Government campaign to end "no DSS" practices. We recently had a No. 10 roundtable on this very issue with a number of key stakeholders, and we are working with those stakeholders to find a satisfactory resolution.

Everyone deserves a safe and secure home, regardless of whether they are in receipt of benefits. Blanket bans do not take account of the individual and their circumstances, which is why we strongly discourage them. We would encourage landlords and agents to consider all potential and existing tenants in receipt of housing benefit and universal credit on an individual basis. We have already seen some positive changes from property sites that have committed to remove “no DSS” wording adverts from across their platforms, and lenders have changed their policies to remove mortgage restrictions that would prevent landlords from renting to tenants in receipt of housing support. Metro Bank is one of the latest to remove such restrictions, and I hope others will follow, but work is ongoing and we will continue to bring the sector together to tackle these practices.

Jim Shannon: It would annoy us greatly to find that rental landlords were discriminating against people because they were in receipt of benefits or were DSS applicants. Does the Minister agree that if there is discrimination, which clearly many of us in this House think there would be, under discrimination laws it would be illegal to do that? Also, what action would the Minister, in co-operation with colleagues of course, take to make sure that did not happen?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Although that might be discrimination in terms of the terminology we would use, it might not fall under the legal definition of it. As a result, we believe that the best way of tackling this issue is to work with key stakeholders such as landlords and mortgage lenders, as well as with those who provide insurance, because we know that there is a particular issue in that regard. We had a successful roundtable at No. 10 recently, where I genuinely believe we had a good cross-section of all the key players from across the board. We are starting to see progress in this area, and I am sure that by taking this collaborative approach, with the Government working with business, key stakeholders and the charitable and voluntary sector, we will truly get a grip on this issue and tackle it. We do not want to see anyone who is in receipt of benefits being discriminated against in this way.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing an intervention before he moves on. I am going to test your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I know that the Minister’s dogs were successful in the dog of the year competition not so long ago, as were my own, and I just want to raise a point about pets. Has he had a chance to consider the fact that another hidden way of excluding people in an overheated rental market is to adopt a no-pets policy? The Opposition have said that we want to get rid of that policy in tenancies, and I wonder whether the Minister has considered that as well.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman is a dog owner, and I am as well. I would not be without our Charlie, and I think that my two daughters would rather throw me out than the dog. In answer to his question, this is an action issue for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I can assure him that I am working closely across the board with my counterparts in that Department, and I have a meeting with them tomorrow at which I shall raise that very issue.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South also touched on the question of supply, which follows neatly on from the hon. Gentleman’s point. As I have said, I work very closely indeed on this with my counterparts at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and I am sure that the hon. Lady would expect nothing less. Any changes to LHA rates must go hand in hand with how we look at supply, which is why it is essential that we have those meetings. I have them regularly, and I shall have one tomorrow. It will come as no surprise to her that I will continue to push my colleagues in the Department to look at how we can increase the supply of council, social and affordable housing. She mentioned Matt Downie of Crisis, but she missed the three letters that he now has the end of his name. I understand that he was recently awarded an MBE by Her Majesty the Queen, and I would like to send my congratulations to Matt, who is a huge asset to that organisation.

As a Government, we are proud of the progress we have made on our welfare reforms. We now have a record-breaking labour market, with over 3.6 million more people in work across the UK than in 2010 and with unemployment at its lowest rate since the 1970s, having fallen by more than half since 2010. This Government will continue to reform the welfare system so that it promotes work as the most effective route out of poverty. That is fairer to those who receive it and to the taxpayer who pays for it. Work is the pillar of a strong economy and a strong society. We believe that work should always pay, and we need a welfare system that helps people into work, supports those who need help and is fair to everyone who pays for it.

Lilian Greenwood: I hear what the Minister says, but he must be as concerned as I am that so many of the people who are now in poverty are also in work. In addressing the issue that we are talking about today, why is it right to force those who are least able to pay for the cost of welfare reform to do so, rather than looking at placing a control on rents as a way of controlling expenditure on welfare payments and protecting those who are most vulnerable from the impact of having to reduce expenditure?

Will Quince: I do not entirely recognise the picture that the hon. Lady paints. There have been huge positive changes for some of the lowest paid in our country. The national living wage has risen to £8.21, increasing a full-time worker’s pay by more than £2,750 since 2016. Our tax changes will make basic rate taxpayers more than £1,200 better off than they were in 2010, and we have doubled the free childcare available to working parents of three and four-year-olds to 30 hours per week, saving them up to £5,000 per child.

I was about to mention universal credit. Universal credit replaces the outdated and complex benefit system of the past, which too often stifled people’s potential, creating cliff edges at 16, 24 and 30 hours and punitive effective tax rates of more than 90% for some. The system was punishing claimants for doing the right thing. In the autumn Budget last year, we listened to concerns about universal credit delivery and funding, and announced a £4.5 billion cash boost to universal credit to ensure that vulnerable claimants and families would be supported in the transition to universal credit and that millions would keep more of what they earned.

[Will Quince]

We announced a package of additional support worth £1 billion for all those being moved on to universal credit. This includes a two-week continuation of legacy benefits, a 12-month exemption period from the minimum income floor, a reduction in the deductions cap and an extension of the advances repayment period.

In conclusion, this Government remain committed to a strong safety net for those who need it. That is why we continue to spend more than £90 billion a year on welfare benefits for people of working age—

Lilian Greenwood: I would not like the Minister to finish without ensuring that I have understood what he is saying. He said earlier that the freeze on local housing allowance rates would end in April next year. Can I check whether LHA rates will also be restored to at least the 30th percentile of local rents, or whether they

will just be allowed to rise from the level that they are now? Given that he has said that the freeze will end in April 2020, what additional help will he provide for those who are struggling to pay their rent now?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her further intervention, just as I was reaching the end of my conclusion. I will comment on what she has just said in a moment. The Government continue to spend more than £90 billion a year on welfare benefits for people of working age, and the freeze to LHA rates and working-age benefits will end in March 2020. In answer to the further questions she rightly asked, that is a decision for the Secretary of State, and I will be working closely with her on that in the coming days, weeks and months.

Question put and agreed to.

7.47 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 17 June 2019

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Pet Identification

4.30 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 229004 relating to the identification of pets.

The petition calls for compulsory scanning of the microchips of all cats that are injured or have died in road traffic accidents and are collected by councils at roadsides, on paths and in all other locations. Dog owners have also supported the petition because it has implications for all pets found deceased on council roads and paths.

The Gizmo's Legacy petition has met its target because we are a nation of animal lovers. Forty-nine per cent. of UK adults own a pet, with 11.1 million pet cats and 8.9 million pet dogs across the UK. This debate is about the human suffering caused by a family pet going missing. Pet owners suffer terribly when their cat or dog goes missing. Everyone knows someone whose cat or dog has disappeared, and the frantic searching that ensues. Everyone has seen attached to lampposts the desperate posters that often offer a reward, the photos in shop windows, or the social media posts on community pages from cat owners pleading with everyone to check their sheds and garages for a beloved missing cat. I get a little anxious when my fellow goes out in the summer and does not come home at night, which he does a few nights a year. So far, he has always eventually returned home.

Pet owners never give up searching when there is hope. Sadly, their time and money are often wasted chasing a lost cause because their council has no clear policy. Some councils are better than others, but there is no consistency between them, and on occasion there is even variance within a single council. This debate is about how council staff following a few simple procedures can halt years of searching and heartache for pet owners, who live in hope of a miracle that will never happen. Often, the not knowing hurts the most for those pet owners—if only owners of a missing pet had a crystal ball to find out whether their cat or dog is still alive and well. We do not have crystal balls, but we do have microchips, and much more could be done to make use of them.

The Gizmo's Legacy petition was created by Helena Abrahams, who is sitting in the Public Gallery. She is a cat owner, cat-sitter and volunteer who scans microchips and has reunited hundreds of deceased cats with their owners every year. Not all pets are microchipped, so she photographs each pet she finds. It is a heartbreaking task, but Helena knows that if she does not do it, there is a risk that the pet will simply end up in landfill and the owner will have no chance even to collect the body to bury or cremate it.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling opening speech, which will resonate well beyond this Chamber. I put on the record my admiration for the determination and passion shown by Helena and her team of volunteers. At its heart, their argument is about our compassion at the worst moment for a pet owner or parent—for all intents and purposes, pets are family members. We are asking for standard and consistent practice across the country that is supported by law—a Government looking for a legacy could implement that now—to ensure that a cat that has been involved in a traffic accident or killed in some other way is returned to his or her mum or dad through scanning. It is a simple process and many local authorities are already picking such animals up.

Pets should not end up in landfill but be returned to the arms of their mum and dad. Otherwise, even in this time of austerity, we risk having councils with all the parts but no heart. I hope that the attention and support shown by the 100,000-plus signatures collected by my constituent Helena and her team set a trend of expectation of changes in law to end that practice quickly and reunite parents with their cats.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): It is a good job Sir Nicholas Winterton is not in the Chair. I ought to explain to hon. Members that Mr Frith very kindly and courteously indicated that he has to be in two places at once. I am not normally quite so relaxed about interventions, but on this occasion, it was fair for him to make his point.

James Frith: Thank you, Sir Roger.

Martyn Day: I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) for his intervention—he made some fantastic points with which I agree entirely. I join him in praising his constituent Helena Abrahams for the absolutely fantastic work she does.

As part of sharing so many lost and found cats on social media, Helena set up the first deceased cat group on Facebook, "Deceased Cats UK and Ireland", after she lost her beloved cat Gizmo, who was chipped but was not scanned and was disposed of in the most horrific way. Through that group, it came to light that so many cats throughout the UK were being disposed of like trash, without councils scanning them for microchips. The general public witnessed councils throwing cats in the back of refuse trucks and caged vans. Helena realised that for the sake of her other cats and all cats nationwide, she needed to take action, so she set up the Gizmo's Legacy petition. Within six months, it had over 107,000 signatures, which is a tremendous effort.

Helena joined forces with It's All About The Animals, Pet Theft Awareness, Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance, Animals Lost and Found in Kent, Vets Get Scanning, Harvey's Army, DogLost, and Cats Protection. These organisations all recognise that no unified procedure is in place for when dead pets are recovered under council jurisdiction. Gizmo's Legacy has been campaigning since 2016. The founding members include Wendy Andrew, Angela Hoy, Beryl Beckwith, Geoff Sharp, June Jeffrey, and Valerie Peachey. They have tirelessly raised awareness about the issue and the devastating impact on owners and their families. The mental health implications for owners who never get the closure of knowing what happened to their beloved pet cannot be overestimated.

[*Martyn Day*]

We already scan dead pets found on the motorway and on the strategic road network—a positive move following the work of Harvey’s Army, which secured Harvey’s Law. Harvey was a miniature poodle who went missing in November 2013; he was microchipped and wore a collar and tag. Just 21 minutes after he went missing, his body was recovered; it was stored and then cremated, yet no contact was made with his owners, who, with friends, searched for 13 weeks before discovering what happened to him. Harvey’s Army is a registered charity and has grown to include more than 300 volunteers across England, Scotland and Wales, who are active in trying to identify and connect families with their lost pets.

Following a parliamentary debate in 2015, the Government committed to requiring Highways England to scan all pets found and, if a microchip is found, to inform the owners. Similarly, Transport Scotland has been mandated to scan pets collected on its strategic road network. However, most cats are killed on minor roads, and what to do remains at the discretion of local authorities. Gizmo’s Legacy calls for the same model to be implemented on council roads, paths and all locations that councils collect from, to ensure the same empathy and respect for cats and dogs wherever they are found.

Some councils already have a procedure in place, but it varies from council to council; “best practice” is followed very loosely and often ignored, or it relies on animal-loving council staff with an understanding of how they would feel if their own pet were found dead. Some councils, such as Leeds Council, do not even scan.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having secured this debate. I am an owner of several cats. My first cat was killed before my eyes when I was aged about six; he jumped in front of a lorry, and I knew what had happened to him.

In the past two years, we have lost three cats. The only way that we could discover what had happened to them was by producing posters and the children in my family going door to door, asking people in the area if they knew what had happened to those cats. We discovered that each of them had been knocked down by a car. The council in the area in which we live has a policy of reporting cats that are chipped to the owner when their cat is killed, but the council did not report on any of those three occasions. I congratulate those who are attempting to get a firm policy throughout the country that is not dependent on someone’s postal code, because the loss of a cat is almost the same for a family as the loss of a human being.

Martyn Day: I thank the hon. Lady for that wonderful personal example, which highlights the problem exactly: councils have policies but may not follow them. The distress caused by people having to search—going to great lengths and incurring expense—amounts to an inhuman way of treating our own citizens.

Many will know that I have a cat called Porridge who is very much part of my family in West Lothian where, I am delighted to say, the council recently reviewed its practice and will implement a revised policy from July. It will ensure that pets killed on roads are collected,

checked for identification chips and reported to Petsearch, which will contact the owners. The council will store pets in a freezer for up to seven days to allow for notification and collection, with unclaimed pets then being cremated. That is a good example of best practice, and I am glad it is coming in. We should encourage more such practice around the country.

Let me read an account in Helena Abrahams’s own words:

“I was asked to go and retrieve a deceased cat in Bolton. When I arrived unfortunately I witnessed the council cage van already attending. The council worker proceeded to throw the dead cat in the back with the rubbish while laughing quite openly with the driver of the van.

I was absolutely infuriated by what I witnessed and was determined to somehow rescue the body of the cat from them. When I composed myself I followed the van to where they were now emptying the street bins and approached the men never mentioning what I had witnessed but asking if they had collected a cat recently as I believed I knew the owner.

He proceeded to get the cat’s body for me and I quickly left the area and scanned it for a chip. He was not chipped but I left him with a local vet and used his photos to locate his owner on Facebook. Bolton council failed on more than one occasion and definitely don’t scan.”

That backs up the story we just heard from the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) about her council. It also illustrates the fact that council staff do not have a set policy to follow. The cat’s body could so easily have been placed into a separate bag, labelled up and handed to a designated staff member trained to use the simple scanner. That is another sign that not all councils take the collection of dead pets seriously. Bear in mind that all councils are required to scan dogs, so they have the equipment. There is absolutely no excuse for scanning not to happen.

Another message sent to Gizmo’s Legacy reveals more evidence that council staff are failing pet owners. This incident happened to Wendy Andrew in Oldham:

“A while back I went to pick up a deceased cat that had been reported via our Facebook group ‘Deceased cats UK and Ireland’, on Shaw road, Oldham. As I arrived at the location I saw a small road sweeper driving up and down the road and I parked my car and was looking for the cat. As the sweeper passed me he made conversation and asked me was I ok. I said, ‘I’m looking for a deceased cat reported in this area.’ and he then said, ‘Oh the big road sweeper just came and swept it up. That is what we are told to do.’ He then said there would be ‘nothing left of the cat now as the sweeper just sucks them up and annihilates them.’

I said, ‘Do you not pick them up and check them for chips?’ He said, ‘No they just go back to the depot and empty their loads on to the local tip.’ I did say, ‘That’s disgraceful. That was someone’s much loved baby,’ but he replied, ‘That’s what we are told to do.’” All too often, that is what many council refuse people are told to do. From an operational point of view, I can understand it, but it is not humane and there is better practice that they could follow for very little extra effort.

In that incident we again see a lack of council policy, of respect and of empathy. All of that results in an owner still searching, knocking on doors, spending money on unnecessary posters and leaflets, and searching the internet for a cat they will never find. Perhaps a distressed family is not able to sleep at night with the worry that their cat is trapped, has been stolen or is being cruelly mistreated. We all know that pet owners never give up searching. The owner of that cat would surely rather know the truth.

I ask everyone to think for a moment how they would feel if they found out that their pet had been thrown into the back of a wagon and tipped into a landfill site like rubbish. To those who signed the petition, the idea of their family member becoming rubbish is simply abhorrent. A pet's body cannot be brought back to life but the body is the owner's property, and the owner deserves the right to choose what happens to it. Many councils are ignoring that.

The Gizmo's Legacy team have had several high-profile names and organisations supporting them or helping to achieve the target that triggered this debate. Special thanks must go to "Emmerdale" actress Samantha Giles, BBC News, "North West Tonight", "Granada Reports", Eamonn Holmes, Ruth Langford, the lost and found groups on Facebook, Dr Daniel Allen, Richard Jordan, Debbie Matthews, Deborah Meaden, the hon. Member for Bury North, Dermot O'Leary, Rachel Riley, the actress who plays Harriet Finch, Peter Egan, TV vet and campaigner Marc Abraham, DogLost, the Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance, Cats Protection and Harvey's Army.

Those organisations and individuals recognise the importance of pets in our lives and all share posts from the Gizmo's Legacy Twitter and Facebook accounts calling for Gizmo's law. In addition, the team thank the many radio stations that did interviews, all the newspapers that published articles and, of course, members of the public who worked tirelessly distributing posters to help get the signatures. All those people are animal lovers and understand that pets are valued companions to many folk—their pet is more than a family member and is often their best friend.

The way in which the country supported this petition has been heartfelt. It shows the passion people feel for the need for Gizmo's law. Obviously, the general public were unaware of the practice of many councils, but are grateful to have had it brought to their attention and to have the opportunity to press the Government to amend it. Cats as well as dogs are part of the family. They are not a commodity to be disposed of on rubbish heaps.

For people to lose their cat or dog to a road traffic accident and never have the opportunity to say goodbye rips the heart out of families and wrecks lives. Why have their beloved pet chipped just to be disregarded and thrown away as trash? It takes seconds to scan a microchip, to get the details and to inform the owner. Given that we encourage microchipping as best practice, we need to follow up to make it worth while for people to do it.

James Frith: To follow up on the hon. Gentleman's point, this is about joining up policy. The policy and the legislation are there, and there is evidence of good practice, so this is about joining it up. For the policy not to stand in isolation, we have to apply the empathy. His point is well made. We can turn things around the moment we ask those same people to envisage that happening to their pet—to all intents and purposes, pet owners view pets as family. Underpin it by legislative change, yes, but this is about empathy, otherwise the policy stands in isolation, detached from people's experiences. To give a worst-case scenario, when I met Helena and her team, we talked of an early-morning drive home from holiday and seeing a dead cat on the road. I, too, felt a sense of empathy—the idea that such animals end up not being returned to their families. That is at the heart of this, is it not?

Martyn Day: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point—this is about empathy. What we are calling for is easily attainable within the current resources.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): There is no question about the success of the compulsory microchipping of dogs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that basing the need for the microchipping of cats on the risk that the animals pose to the public simply ignores the welfare of the animals in question?

Martyn Day: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. This is not about the safety of the public. It is about the family's wellbeing and knowing what has happened to their beloved pet.

The process of scanning can be done in minutes and is not a complex procedure. Councils that have a policy to scan deceased pets often leave the onus on the owner to contact the council within seven days, which is a pointless exercise if an owner is not notified or if the pet is disposed of without the owner being given the chance to collect the body, to bury or cremate it, and to deal with their grief. During the holiday period, people might be away for longer than one week, so seven days is just unrealistic.

Too often, there is a disparity between council policy and actual practice. We know that from various cases evidenced by witnesses and council workers. One such worker, who wished to remain anonymous, told Gizmo's Legacy:

"Oh, we don't scan them, we are told not to. We take them to the local tip, where they are thrown in a freezer until full then put into the refuse."

Des Kane is a volunteer chip scanner with Harvey's Army. He regularly pops by his local council's storage facility in Coatbridge in North Lanarkshire, to check whether any pets in the freezer can be identified. He finds the council's approach to pets found on the road to be very hit and miss:

"I find that the only real documenting of any such unfortunate deceased pet is the label attached to the bag in which they are placed. This label states the following: animal type, colour, where and when picked up from, and any distinguishing markings.

To my knowledge that is as far as it goes with documentation and I'm not aware of any other efforts made by the council to find a potential owner, i.e. posting on their website or social media. They do have an animal welfare officer who they call to scan animals when they've been lifted or they call me when he's not available.

I've found the council staff at the facility very accommodating and helpful but I feel the council policy, as it stands, could be a bit more thorough in trying to contact a possible owner, although I know they are more proactive than some other authorities."

Such volunteers do a tremendous job around the country uniting people with their deceased pets, but it should not be left to them or to the random lottery of what each local council chooses to do.

Cat owner Anita Short, a resident of Sunderland City Council, learned from a neighbour that her cat Toby had been collected by cleansing services. She then contacted the council and was invited to Sunderland council's depot to see if Toby was in its freezer. Anita recognised her cat from his collar. She asked why her cat had not been scanned and the excuse she was given was that they did not have a scanner on them. Why does the council state that its workers will scan animals they pick up? As I said, they should all have scanners, given the

[*Martyn Day*]

requirement for dogs. The council was not following its own policy. Anita Short would have never known that her cat had been collected and was in a council freezer if it was not for her neighbour. Relying on best practice is meaningless if policies are not strictly followed, which is why Gizmo's law needs to be implemented.

DogLost.co.uk is the country's leading lost-and-found pets service—despite the name, it also deals with cats. It has a national network of volunteers. Its service is free but it relies on donations. Hon. Members have probably seen its posters attached to lamp posts or in shop windows with details of missing pets. Since the launch of DogLost UK in 2003, more than 105,000 dogs and cats have been registered as missing or stolen. Thankfully, nearly three-quarters of pets have been found. DogLost informs us that, in 2018, 9,029 pets were reported missing. At the start of this month, 24,201 pets were still missing, which means that many families are still searching. How many of those dogs and cats will have been recovered from council roads and paths but never scanned? We will never know how many of those dogs and cats have ended up in landfill because of lax record keeping.

Of course, not all animals are microchipped, so to be fair to councils it is sometimes not possible to find owners even when they scan. What we do know is that two councils admitted to collecting bodies of cats and putting them in the freezer, but failing to scan or keep any records. On questioning, they admitted remembering the description of two cats: that happened to Michelle Morton's cat Cookie, which was in the hands of Blackpool Council, and Janette Barton's cat Benji under Wigan Council. Both those cats were microchipped, but it appears that neither council bothered to scan, because they do not have to—it is only best practice. Councils make their own policies and do not even need to bother to stick to the rules that they have set themselves. Is it too much to ask that they take a few minutes to scan for a chip, keep some records that can be easily accessed and contact owners to let them know the bad news, to give them the chance to collect their pet for burial or cremation?

Janette told us that she still cries over losing her cat. The emotional connection between humans and pets cannot be emphasised enough. This debate is about human suffering, not the lost pet that has caused the human suffering. There are so many heart-breaking examples of families who have lost their pets. Gizmo's Legacy detailed a broad range of them in the pack it sends to members, which highlights that there is a lack of scanning all over the United Kingdom.

The last example I will give is that of Wendy Turner and her cat Merlin, who was neutered and microchipped. After spending a day looking for him, she posted on Facebook and, following a last sighting of him, discovered he had been taken by the council. After contacting the council, Wendy was told that they would be in touch after they had scanned the cat, but that did not happen. She was then given the runaround, being passed on to different departments and being told that Merlin would be added to the list of deceased animals in a day or so. It was to be several weeks later before a vague description of a cat found in the area where Merlin was picked up appeared on the deceased animal list. Wendy says that

“it is two years since I lost Merlin and even now I feel that there is no closure. The thought of his precious remains being tossed away with rubbish or thrown into a furnace with no regard to him or his family I find very hard to accept. I only wanted to bring my boy home. This was the reason why I invested in a microchip. If it was not for the reply to my Facebook post I would still be searching for Merlin.”

People are spending real money to get their cats microchipped, so that when something does go wrong they can be reunited with them, whether alive or unfortunately deceased.

What can be done? Recommendations of good practice clearly do not work for everyone, which suggests that legislation for the UK's 408 councils may be required. Local authorities are devolved, so we may need legislation in the devolved nations as well as in this Parliament. It takes minutes to scan a pet, log details and contact an owner—a small price to pay considering the human misery that searching for a pet generates. It is important that contact is made where microchips exist, and that there be a system to view photos of deceased pets where no microchip is found.

Our pets need improved protection. Gizmo's law would mean that all councils would have to start scanning all animals they collect on all their roads, paths and locations and contacting their owners to give them closure. If the animals are not chipped, they should send images to organisations such as Deceased Cats UK and Ireland or DogLost, which will happily share them to help to trace owners. Councils could even set up a web page or social media site. It is not too much to ask to keep all cats and dogs for at least seven days. If local authorities do not have freezers, they can use a local vets. The petitioners are not asking for anything that is not easily attainable, and given the attendance in the debate, it seems they have broad cross-party support.

We need Gizmo's law to help to protect the basic rights of pet owners: the right to not have a family member thrown into a landfill, and the right to know whether their pet has been found and identified so they can collect the body and start the grieving process. Pets are part of the family. It is unacceptable for councils to treat pets as throwaway rubbish. Now is the time to do away with the postcode lottery of random policies and often uncaring practices that are described by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as best practice. Campaigners and pet owners all hope that the Minister will do the right thing: make Gizmo's law a reality.

4.56 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (*Martyn Day*) for introducing the debate and explaining the real pain when a cat goes missing and no one knows what has happened to it. More than 800 people across the three Plymouth constituencies signed Helena's petition. So many of them have shared stories of their own missing animals to stress how important this issue is—a fairly simple legislative tweak could make a powerful difference to those families. A total of 320 people in the patch that I represent signed the petition. It is clear that British people are asking us to demand an animal welfare agenda that is consistent in its application across the country.

Last year, 230,000 cats were killed in road traffic accidents. That is more than 600 every day. Since this debate started, roughly 12 cats will have died. Each of those incidents will mean a family will not see their moggy come home. Young children will ask where their cat is and everyone will be worried about them. We need to create a regulatory environment where, as much as possible, we value animals and their relationships with families. That is not too much to ask. Every animal matters and, importantly, every cat matters to its family.

As always before I speak in these kinds of debates, I reached out to people on social media. It will be no surprise that many people wanted to share the story of their lost cat—whether it came home, was found or is still missing in action somewhere and the owners do not know what happened. My own cat, the fantastically named Bumblesnarf—after Bumblebee from “Transformers” and Snarf from “ThunderCats”, obviously—went missing and, sadly, was found much later. I know the worry of not knowing where a cat is. We all know that cats have a mind of their own and will not do as they are told—unlike dogs, they will do as they please. Sometimes, they might just want to go out and have a play, but when they go missing there is so much heartache, worry and stress. Emma told me on social media that she was pleased that MPs are pushing for this debate. She talked about the cats that she has lost in road traffic accidents and the importance of microchipping. Others shared similar stories.

The petition calls for councils to have the same respect for cats as they have for dogs. I am proud to say that Labour-run Plymouth City Council treats cats the same as dogs in road traffic accidents. That is really important. We need to engineer out of our system the postcode lottery that the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk spoke about. We must also ensure that councils apply the rules consistently, especially where there are multi-tier councils or borough boundaries. As politicians, we recognise borough boundaries—some of us even recognise the boundaries between wards or polling districts—but for the vast majority of people, they just live in a community.

Martyn Day: Of course, some boundaries run down the middle of a major road, which is exactly where an incident may occur.

Luke Pollard: I agree entirely. That is why it is important that the rules are applied similarly by every council.

As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), there is no statutory obligation to scan microchipped cats when they are found. However, I am proud that Plymouth City Council follows best practice and scans both cats and dogs that are found on roads. If, sadly, the animal did not survive the accident, it is kept for a further two weeks, so there is plenty of time for the owner to be notified and for the pet to be returned to its owner for a proper goodbye.

The law is only paper if it is not enforced, so we need to ensure that the regulatory framework is in place, that councils understand it, and that the people who work on the frontline, who sometimes get a tough time—those who collect the bins and clean our streets, for example—receive training and understand how important that framework is. Because of the level of cuts, we are asking them to clean more streets, or collect more bins, more

quickly. Pausing to collect a cat adds extra work to their day, but it is important that they recognise the value of doing so; that empathy and connection—the thought that it could be their cat—is so important.

Ann Clwyd: I referred to Cardiff City Council, a large city council that is also run by Labour. In theory it reports cat deaths, but in practice it does not.

Luke Pollard: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. That is why it is really important not only that the regulatory framework is tightened but that training is provided so everyone who works on the frontline in our public services, from local councils upwards, understands the value of enforcing that framework and giving proper care to those cats.

Almost one in five households in Britain has a cat, making cats the second most popular pet after dogs. Many people assume that if their pet is microchipped, they will be alerted if something happens. However, we know from the stories we heard earlier and from our own communities that that does not happen in every situation. Under the Road Traffic Act 1988, road users are required to stop and report an accident involving horses, cattle, mules, sheep, pigs, goats or dogs. I think that list partly reflects the very different role of animals in society. The social contract for how animals are used changes every day—we see that in greater demands for protection of animals—so we must ensure that that list is updated to reflect our changing views.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I heard the hon. Gentleman say that having a cat microchipped is no guarantee that it will be scanned if something happens to it. Does he therefore agree that it is not enough just to ask people to microchip their cats? To make any policy coherent, we must legally compel them to do so, as we do with dogs. Local authorities will then step up to that policy and fulfil their duties so that, when something happens to a cat, it is scanned and its owner finds out what happened to it.

Luke Pollard: One thing I have discovered since being elected two years ago is that the public really want proper rules for animal welfare that are properly enforced and properly funded. In that respect, the hon. Lady's point is well put.

Sadly, despite being valued members of households—part of the family—cats are not afforded the same duty of care we afford to cattle, horses, mules and dogs. The life of a cat should be worth no less than that of any other animal, because of the emotional connection that animal brings to the family and its important role in a household. That needs to be addressed.

Unfortunately, road traffic accidents involving cats happen frequently. As we know, cats sometimes misjudge the distance and speed of oncoming vehicles and can be blinded by headlights at night. The law requires people to stop and report the accident if they run over a dog. That helps to save the lives of hundreds of dogs every year. We have spoken so far about reporting in the event that an animal dies, but it can help save the lives of dogs and other animals if people know they are required to stop and report that an animal has been involved in an accident. We should think not just about what happens at the end of an animal's life but about how we prevent needless deaths along the way.

[*Luke Pollard*]

Petplan estimates that a quarter of road accidents involving cats are fatal. That means there is a good chance that a cat will survive if it gets the urgent care it needs, but that can happen only if there is a requirement for road users to report accidents involving cats. I would like the legislative proposals for compulsory microchipping of cats to be tightened, and I would like to see compulsory reporting where a cat is injured or involved in an accident.

Although the debate is about accidents involving pets rather than their owners, I want to take a moment to talk about the importance of drivers and other road users recognising the role of animals in communities. I represent an urban area, but Plymouth is surrounded by beautiful countryside, with many weird and varied country lanes. In such fantastic rural areas, accidents may involve different animals—a cow coming over a high fence, for example. Having the driving skills to understand what anticipatory action to take is really important both on country lanes and on major roads, so part of this debate should be about the need to teach and inform drivers, not just in their driving test and their theory test but throughout their lives, about the importance of looking out for and recognising not only pedestrians but animals on pavements and in other settings. We need to ensure that the structures on our roads are engineered to better protect animals, and we need to make our roads safer. I hope that is not lost on the Minister.

Councils across the UK should be required to follow best practice on scanning cats involved in road traffic accidents, which, as we have heard, a number of councils already do. Families deserve to know what happened to their pet if it goes missing. We need more action from the Government to make tweaks in this area. I say to the Minister, with whom I work in a number of areas, that at a time when the Government's legislative agenda is not as full as it might be, there is space for doing things that have genuine cross-party support. I know that, regardless of what happens with Brexit, nearly all my constituents would want us to act to protect our animals. I think a tweak to the rules to extend compulsory microchipping to cats and to require a uniform approach from every council, no matter which political party runs it, would be well supported.

5.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for bringing forward the debate and setting the scene so well, and I thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) for his contribution.

I am well known as a dog lover. I cannot remember not having had a dog as a pet since I was very young, many years ago in Ballywalter. My wife has volunteered at Assisi Animal Sanctuary for many years and often sees the effects of unwanted and abandoned pets. It breaks her heart and brings a lump to her throat—and perhaps even to mine—to tell me some of those stories. My wife has had cats nearly all her life. I never had a cat until we married. My dogs and her cats came together as she and I came together. I am not sure whether that is why we did so, but that is the way it happened. As a result, we have always had a love for cats.

We live on a farm. Because we own the land, whenever our animals or pets have passed away, we have been able to bury them on the farm, but that is not the case for everyone. I believe that when we are able to bury our dogs and cats on the farm, they may still roam the fields—not physically, but perhaps in their afterlife, wherever that may be.

Microchipping has helped with the abandonment of animals on some scale, but certainly more needs to be done to ensure that those who keep animals are able to do so. I have heard a few people say that homing an animal is as difficult as adopting a child. That is said tongue in cheek—let us be honest—but I am glad that it means the decision to house a pet is measured and well thought out. Assisi, where my wife volunteers, does not allocate a pet—a dog or a cat—to any home without first doing a home visit to ensure that the person is ready to give a home to a dog or cat, is in the frame of mind to do so and, let us be honest, has a home that can give the pet the freedom it needs. For many elderly people, pets can be companions, but it would not be fair for someone disabled or elderly to have a springer spaniel—a very energetic dog—that would run them off their feet. Therefore, pets must be allocated. My wife does home visits, so she knows how important they are.

Some 140 of my constituents signed the petition, which is the reason I am here today, but I am confident that I represent many more people who did not sign the petition but agree with its sentiments. Many people want to see the issue addressed appropriately. Although the law says that people do not need to report hitting an animal with a car, the reality is that that leaves a family heartbroken, not knowing what has happened to their beloved pet.

Many years ago, I was out doing deliveries for the business that I used to have and I came up the Darragh Road in Comber. A cat had been killed that morning and the woman was standing at the side of the road in tears. She asked me whether I would scoop it up and put it in a bag, which I was happy to do. The problem was that, as I was doing that, people thought that I had run it down, which I obviously had not. I was trying to be a good Samaritan and respond to that lady. I understood how heartbroken she was, however, because that was her pet—her cat, her love and her companion.

The petition provides a simple solution. If an animal is found, an effort should be made to find the family and allow them to deal with it. To do that, we need to push for people to get their cat microchipped to ensure that any new regulations are worth it. I am glad that Cats Protection in Northern Ireland has a scheme that enables cats to be neutered for £5—many other schemes across Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom are run by volunteers and charitable groups. The offer is open to owners who are receiving state benefits, who are on a low income, who are students or pensioners and who live in Northern Ireland. Microchipping is also available under the campaign at some participating veterinary practices, which may incur a small additional £5 fee. Assisi, the charity that my wife works for, also has a policy of neutering all cats, so there is some control. We cannot ignore the good work that charity groups do across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Those who microchip their cat obviously care for the animal and deserve a modicum of care in response from their council. I have written to my local council—Ards and North Down Borough Council—to ask whether it will co-ordinate the effort put forward by Cats Protection. I served on the old Ards Borough Council for 26 years and came off it when I was elected to this place in 2010. To be fair to the council, when it is asked by the general public to call out and collect a dead dog or cat, it does so without any coercion as part of its commitment to local pet owners, not because there is a written rule, but because it wants to respond to the general public. I congratulate it on being so responsive and community-based on the matter.

In our house, we have three cats and one dog, which all came from charities. The dog came from a bad relationship and had been abused as a pup. It was nervous when it came to us, but it is now very confident and sees the house as its house, rather than anyone else's. The cats were all strays or from charities. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport referred to the name of his cat earlier. Ours are called Nicholas—I am not sure why; it sounds very royal—Muffins and Podge. The three cats are totally different and have different personalities. Two of them stay in the house all day while the other one hunts all day. Living on a farm, I get quite annoyed when the cat brings home some of its trophies, and my wife hates it more than anybody, but that is their nature—they hunt.

There are heartbreaking posts on Facebook, in the local papers, in the provincial papers and in shop windows that ask, "Have you seen this cat?" The children get so upset, but something can be done. That is why I am happy to speak in the debate and add my voice, along with the hon. Members who have spoken and those who will speak, to the 107,062 signatories of the petition. I ask the Minister to begin the work that needs to be done to ensure that the petition's calls are answered and that people know their loved ones have been respectfully put to rest and are not lying in a dump somewhere.

The Minister has always been responsive to our proposals. Our personal discussions with him, and the discussions of others, have indicated that he will probably give us the response that we wish for, which I look forward to. I support the petition's calls and look forward to hearing how the Government intend to respond positively and definitively to make them happen, and to let all those 107,062 signatories of the petition know that the Government work for them.

5.16 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Strangely, I used to have a cat called Muffin as well, which was sadly knocked over at the age of one. It was in the days before microchips, but because it happened in our street, the cat was handed to me and we were able to bury her in the garden, plant a little tree on top and say goodbye to her. I know how important it is for people to be able to do that and to know what has happened to their beloved pet.

Muffin was followed by two ginger cats—I decided to get two cats after that, so if one was knocked over, I would have one left—which lived to be 19 and 21. When

they shuffled off this mortal coil, after a long and happy life, I decided that life was getting slightly complicated and it was too difficult to fit cats into a politician's lifestyle. I admire hon. Members who have pets. I would find it impossible because of living in two places at once. Deep down, however, I am a cat owner. I am very fond of cats and, given the choice, I would have one as a pet. At the moment, it is totally incompatible with this lifestyle.

The other reason I wanted to speak in the debate is that, of anywhere in the country, the petition gathered most support from my constituency. Heywood and Middleton topped the table with 634 signatures, so I feel duty bound to speak on behalf of those constituents who cared enough to sign it. The sad story of Gizmo also happened in my neighbouring constituency of Bury North.

I fully support the aim of the petition, which hon. Members have described as a tweak in the law—that is all. Simply, the petition's aim is that deceased or injured cats be required by law to be scanned in the same way that dogs are, and that efforts be made to track down their owners. Despite cats being popular pets, the law does not require motorists to report running a cat over, nor is it compulsory for cats to be microchipped, although many owners do that voluntarily. According to Cats Protection, 68% of domestic cats are microchipped. Those cat owners have done that for a reason: their hope is that, if their cat goes missing, somebody will scan the chip and the cat will be returned to them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) referred to the Road Traffic Act 1988, which states that collisions causing death or injury to dogs, horses, cattle, pigs, goats, sheep, donkeys and mules, but not cats, must be reported to the police. The Government's guidelines state that there is no requirement to report a collision involving an animal smaller than a dog, although I wonder what size of dog the Government are referring to. That guideline seems deliberately vague. The point is that the law could easily be extended to include cats.

The natural consequence of this petition is to extend compulsory microchipping to cats, to change the law to require motorists to report all accidents in which an animal is injured, and to make it a duty for local authorities to scan deceased and injured cats for microchips. I am pleased to say that my local authority—Labour-run Rochdale Borough Council—already has a policy to check deceased cats for microchips, and it makes every effort to identify pet owners. If the cat has a chip, a member of the environmental management team will contact the owner to break the sad news and arrange for the pet to be either collected or incinerated by the council—whatever the owner decides to do. If the pet does not have a chip, it is stored for up to four weeks in case it fits a description from concerned owners. Unclaimed pets are incinerated after four weeks.

My local authority's response seems sensible and humane, and all councils should adopt it. Handheld scanners are inexpensive and take only a few minutes to use. The point has been well made that councils are already in possession of scanners because of the laws relating to dogs. It would save so much heartache if all councils adopted that practice. It would allow the pet to be buried or cremated with dignity, and would give their owners the chance to say goodbye and get closure.

[Liz McInnes]

The charity Cats Protection supports the compulsory microchipping of cats, which is one of its 2022 agenda priorities. It says that “cats are not political”, although some cats, such as Larry the No. 10 cat, might dispute that. Larry frequently comments on the political issues of the day via his Twitter feed, which may have just a hint of human assistance. At the moment, Larry is extremely concerned about whether the next incumbent of No. 10 has a cat allergy. I wish that was all we had to worry about.

Cats Protection is seeking cross-party support for its 2022 agenda. Compulsory microchipping for owned cats would allow more pets to be reunited with their owners and would enable owners to be contacted if their cat is involved in a road traffic accident. It also stresses the importance of keeping microchip details up to date if the owner moves house, for example. Those proposals are supported by the Labour party’s animal welfare plan, which calls for mandatory microchipping for cats, and a requirement for motorists to report all accidents in which an animal had been injured or killed. The natural consequence of that would be that all councils put in place a policy on scanning cats as well as dogs—a simple step that would save so much heartache.

There are many good reasons to bring about this change in the law, and not one reason why we should not. It is clear that it has cross-party support, so let’s just do it.

5.24 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Like everybody else who has contributed, I am delighted to participate in this debate. I thank the Petitions Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for his well-informed and comprehensive speech to kick off the debate.

Like everybody else in the Chamber, I am hugely fond of animals. We all appreciate the importance of family pets. I may completely divide public opinion across the UK, but I wish to confess on the record that I am a cat lover and have had pet cats in the past. I had a cat call Kitty and a stray cat who my family took in at my behest. We called her Misty because she had a misty past and we did not know where she came from, but she was very keen to stay with us. Like the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), I suffer from the lack of a cat at the moment, not having sufficient time to look after and care for one in the way that cats demand. I declare an interest: I am a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cats. A number of hon. Members in the Chamber confessed to me that they did not know that there was such a group. They are all very welcome to come along.

If, as the petition calls for, all cats are scanned for a microchip when they are lost, injured or killed, it makes nothing but logical sense that all cats ought to be required by law to be microchipped if this policy is to have any real coherence. Family pets add so much value to our lives and help us to maintain better mental health, whatever our age. They play a significant role in combating loneliness, especially, but not exclusively, for older people.

Everyone understands that the compulsory microchipping of dogs has been very positive, so why is the same not the case for cats? As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) said, every animal—every cat—matters. A cat’s life is worth the same as any dog’s life. Dogs are required to be microchipped, and drivers are required to report if they are involved in an accident with them.

In an ideal world, we would all make every effort to have our cats microchipped, because there are significant benefits to cats and cat owners in doing so. The SNP Government in Scotland have long recommended the microchipping of cats as best practice in their code of practice for the welfare of cats. Responsible cat owners want to do what is best for their cat’s welfare, and it is important that they are able to avail themselves of this option. It is always better to encourage people to do something, rather than force them. If all owners were fully informed of the benefits of microchipping their cats, I am sure that the vast majority—many more than currently do so—would be keen to take up that offer. Many cat owners do not think about losing their cat or about their cat having an accident until it happens, so they do not prioritise microchipping, and by the time they do, it is too late. If the law right across the UK required all cats to be microchipped, and councils by necessity played their part, it would save a lot of distress to cat owners and cats themselves, and in the event of loss or injury, it could save a cat’s life.

The Scottish and UK Governments have yet to be persuaded of the merits of compulsory microchipping for cats. I do not really understand why, as we already have compulsory microchipping for dogs. Those of us who believe that it is a good idea therefore need to continue to make the case to persuade them that it is the right thing to do. I believe that it is the right thing to do for cats and cat owners, and it is the right thing to do from an animal welfare perspective, from any angle we choose to look at it. If chipping is compulsory, local authorities will of necessity scan all cats that are lost, killed or injured. Given that dogs are already microchipped, this is not such a great leap from current practice, as the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton said. Clearly, some cat owners will not microchip their cat unless it is an absolute requirement, so in the end animal welfare requires us to make this a legislative matter.

Ross Thomson: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady. I want to work with her and colleagues to ensure that the law is changed, both across Scotland and in the rest of the UK. Does she agree that, if we secure compulsory microchipping and scanning, it would be beneficial to have one centralised database, so that when a missing cat or dog is found it is really easy to get the data from the database and reunite the pet with its owner? At the moment, it is far too complex. The Government really need to look at having one centralised database.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. A centralised database is particularly important for cats, rather than perhaps dogs, because cats, as we know, often wander extremely far from home, and may wander into a completely different part of the country. A centralised database would make a lot of sense. I will press the Scottish Government on compulsory microchipping

for cats. The matter is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, and I hope that MPs representing constituencies in England will likewise press the UK Government and the Minister, who I am sure is listening carefully.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk rightly pointed out that local authorities across the UK have a confused and patchy policy on scanning for microchips. It is clear that the reason for such patchy and inconsistent practices across local authorities is because there is no compulsory microchipping. If we sort that out—local authorities will do their duty and follow the law if it is changed—it will reconcile thousands of lost, killed and injured cats with their grateful owners.

I am not a particularly prolific user of social media; I tend to post whatever I want to post and then log off. However, almost every time I log on to social media, like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) I see posts from worried pet owners—overwhelmingly cat owners—who are desperately worried about their family pet, who has wandered off and seems to be lost or worse.

Having been a pet owner myself, I completely understand, as I am sure everyone in the Chamber does, how worrying it is when a beloved pet cat does not come home, and the owner does not know whether it is lost or in distress, whether it is trapped somewhere and cannot get back home, or whether it has even met with some terrible accident. Not knowing whether we will ever see a beloved pet again is extremely distressing.

We have heard that it cannot be overestimated just how much a part of the family our pets become. It is a really distressing experience for any pet owner to go through. If a cat seems to be lost, and if it is microchipped and microchipping is enshrined by law, it is extremely likely that when it is found it will be returned to its owner, as their details will be contained in the microchip that will be scanned by the local authorities. I honestly cannot see any downside to that idea.

Compulsory microchipping and local authorities scanning microchips are inherently intertwined. The patchy and inconsistent scanning that we have heard about today cannot continue in all good conscience. We have heard from the UK Government and the Scottish Government that it is best practice to microchip a cat. If that is the case, then it must be better practice, by definition, for all cats to be microchipped—by law, if necessary. It must be even better practice for local authorities to fulfil what would become a legal duty to scan cats that are lost, injured or killed, so that owners can be informed.

I have heard some people argue that this is not necessary because a cat can wear a collar with the owner's contact details, and that works just as well. Although that is better than nothing, it is not as secure a safeguard as a microchip; collars can become loose and untangled, and be lost. There are no such worries with a microchip.

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home is unequivocal in its view that microchipping is the most effective way of ensuring that a cat can be safely reunited with its owner quickly, together with recording its medical and domestic history. In 2018, it was able to reunite 333 lost cats with their owners because they were microchipped. We can increase that number with compulsory microchipping, which will, of necessity, mean compulsory scanning by local authorities.

As we have heard, drivers are required by law to stop and report incidents of hitting a

“horse, cattle, ass, mule, sheep, pig, goat or dog”,

but not a cat. This seems an odd omission that must be addressed. I know several people who have found a poor dead cat at the side of a road, after it has been hit by a vehicle as it tried to cross the road. That is deeply distressing and makes the loss of a beloved pet all the more difficult to come to terms with. It is as if the poor cat, who was like a member of its own family, was discarded in a way that suggests it simply did not matter. To all of us who consider ourselves animal lovers, that cannot be right. Research has shown that over 60% of people in the UK believe that the law should be changed and that drivers who knock down a cat should have to report that as well. Why should cats continue to be excluded?

When a driver hits a dog with their car and fails to report it to the police, they can be fined up to £5,000. The fact that they are under no obligation to make a report when they hit a cat is deeply unfair. We understand that dogs are more likely to inflict damage; there is insurance and liability to consider, and dogs are supposed to be on leads on the highway, so perhaps their owners have been negligent. Despite that, the current situation continues to be deeply unfair and distressing to cats and their owners, as the hon. Member for Strangford and others indicated.

Every year, countless cats are left to die alone, sometimes slowly and in pain, before being dumped in landfill, when they could perhaps have been saved with treatment or their grieving owners could have been given the opportunity to say a proper goodbye. If drivers knock down a dog—or even an ass—they cannot flee the scene without reporting it to the police. Cats must not be seen as less worthy or less important to their owners. If it were illegal for a driver to fail to report the knocking down of a cat, a compulsory microchip in the cat would mean the owner would be notified in the appropriate way by the local authority, instead of being left to wonder what happened to their beloved family pet, perhaps for years.

Many local councils might argue that they do not have the resources to purchase scanning machines for microchipped cats. I pay tribute to Cats Protection, which has worked with local authorities across the UK for some time, donating scanning machines to those that struggle to afford or prioritise providing them. A number of local authorities have been able to commit to adhering to a scanning policy, as a direct result of those efforts. That is important as it is believed that of approximately 11 million pet cats in the UK, over 230,000 die on our roads each year. Charities such as CatsMatter believe this figure could be higher, due to under-reporting. For fear of banging on, if the law were changed to ensure compulsory microchipping, local authorities would prioritise purchasing scanning machines to comply with that law.

I pay tribute to North Ayrshire Cats Protection; it does sterling work and has some really dedicated volunteers whom I met shortly after I was elected. I had the good fortune and pleasure of meeting Fonzie the cat, with whom I was quite taken.

We have heard voices in the Chamber calling for cats to be microchipped and for improvements in scanning procedures in the event of misadventure, so that cats

[Patricia Gibson]

can be returned to their owners. For me, it follows that all cats ought to be microchipped for the same reason. Where we cannot persuade—and we have not persuaded everybody—we have to compel owners; it is the right thing to do. I support this petition and would go further, as I have set out. We need a coherent, joined-up policy, and I urge the Minister to consider compulsory microchipping, which will also deliver routine scanning by local authorities of cats who are lost or injured.

Make no mistake: I will pursue the Scottish Government about this matter. I ask the Minister to set about correcting the matter for cats in England, as I will seek to address it for the cats in Scotland.

5.39 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I know that if you were not in the Chair you would be speaking in the debate, but unfortunately you have to keep mum. I hope we have done enough, and that you feel our representations have fully covered the matter.

The issue has been covered well, with excellent speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), and a number of interventions, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Frith), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). I should expect nothing else, as a fellow cat lover. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is as expert on this subject as on everything else, also contributed, and there were interventions from the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson). I thank the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) for introducing the debate. He covered nearly all the issues, and what he did not cover was dealt with comprehensively by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), so I am left with an unenviable task: there is nothing for me to say because it has all been said. However, I want to give some personal witness, and to make an offer to the Minister.

I shall start with the offer. As has been said, the change in question is a small amendment to the Road Traffic Act 1988. I thank Battersea, Blue Cross and Cats Protection for giving us full briefings. The amendment would insert the word “cat” into the list of animals in section 170(8) of the 1988 Act. On behalf of the Opposition, I make the offer to the Government to help them in doing that. We will play no politics in any way, and will just get the amendment in place. I do not know whether the change could be made by statutory instrument. That would be good, but we are willing to work with the Government. It would be a minor change, but an important one, which is why we are here.

The petition was signed by more than 100,000 people. For those who have had the experiences we have heard about, it is emotional. To give personal witness, I have had three cats that were knocked down: Wolfie, Tiggy and Darcy. The first and third I had to go and find myself, and the second was found and taken to the local vet. All my cats are microchipped. We were able to bury Tiggy’s ashes in the garden after he was incinerated. It is a very emotional thing. At any one time I have five cats

using the catflaps in my house, and I think there are more, as we are generous with the amount of food we put out. I am a cat lover. To declare an interest, I am secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on cats—it is good to see my fellow member, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran, here. The group is not necessarily very political, but in one respect the issue is political, because we are asking the Government to change the law. The change we seek would be limited, but we hope that, if nothing else, it will mean that people can say goodbye to their animal if it is knocked over and dies. Alternatively, if an animal is injured, hopefully something might be done to save its life.

I will go on to my hobby-horse—although not for long—about what happens when someone knocks an animal over. Accidents happen, but most are preventable. It is purely bad driving. People drive far too fast and therefore they are responsible. My view of driving has always been that it is a privilege rather than a right. This is nothing to do with cats, but it is pertinent. There are a number of commons in my constituency, and every year cows and horses are put on to them. The Minister will know the reason for that: it is the only way to keep the grass down and maintain the quality of biodiversity on very important commons. Every year 10 to 12 cattle or horses are knocked down. If someone hits one of those animals it will not do a lot of good to their vehicle, let alone to them, but it is because they have been driving too fast. The other day at dusk I was going at about 15 to 20 mph, because it was difficult to see. Two idiots went past me doing at least 40 mph or 50 mph. They would not have had a chance of avoiding a cow or horse. It makes you think, “What planet are these people on?” Sadly, the owner of such an animal has to deal with the carcass, as it is usually dead. It is even worse if it is dying, as a vet has to be got to euthanise the animal painlessly. I do not understand why people do not see that it is their responsibility if they knock over an animal. I would widen that view to include wild animals, given the number of badgers, foxes and so on that get killed. If someone hits an animal, it is dangerous to them as well as the animal. A lot of road accidents are caused by people driving far too fast and then hitting something.

We are talking about cats. Most are somebody’s pet and really important to that person. People know when they have hit something. I am sorry, but it is not explicable by saying “Oh, I didn’t realise I hit it.” People should always stop and think, “Maybe they did run out. Maybe I had no chance. I hit them, and I therefore at least have to do something about it.” It is a criminal offence if someone hits a dog and does not report it. If their number is taken, they can be dealt with. We have put that into law. I ask the Minister, with the best of intentions: can we just include cats? Cats are, next to dogs, probably the second most popular pet. There are also many feral cats, which probably increase the numbers dramatically. That is why I am in favour of neutering, and have always done things in the past to encourage those campaigns. Certainly, Cats Protection will always neuter cats, usually for free, if people bring them along. That is why I also believe in microchipping. I support the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran in her view that microchipping should be compulsory, because we want to control cat numbers. That is right and appropriate.

We recognise that people who have a pet have a responsibility, but so do others who, perhaps in a genuine accident, knock an animal over. They should report it and ensure that the person who has undergone that loss can at least know what happened to the animal. The worst thing possible is when someone's animal has gone missing and they do not know for days, or sometimes weeks, what has happened. There have been good cases when animals have been lost for 10 years or more and suddenly returned, although those involve very strange circumstances.

I ask the Minister in good faith whether we can make the proposed change. It may not be easy, but I hope that it could be done through secondary legislation. If it is put on the agenda, we will genuinely support it. I make that commitment. There will not be any funny games: we will not suddenly say, "We're going to include other animals." Let us keep it to cats. That is what the petition is about. That is what people want us to do.

I hope that the Minister will say some good things. At the moment, the Government have not committed to microchipping, as they should, for the reasons I have given, or to including cats in the list of animals that should be reportable if knocked over. It is not much to ask. Most people are horrified if they knock an animal over. Sadly, there are those who seem rather indifferent, but they should not be driving anyway, in my opinion, because they are a danger. It could be a child—that is the repercussion. We know how dangerously some people drive, and I am always mystified by how few people are banned at any one time, given how many people I see when I cycle around who seem to drive incredibly badly, and to be indifferent. We have to deal with that issue, but the debate today is on a narrower issue and we are talking about cats. If someone knocks a cat over, they should have to report it. They should deal with it, because that is the right and humane thing to do.

5.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): Sir Roger, I know that you have a real and sincere interest in this subject, so it must be difficult for you to sit in the Chair during the debate, but we know that you are with us in spirit and want to improvements to be made in this area.

This has been an important and fascinating debate. I have learned more about the names of hon. Members' cats than I ever thought I needed to; we have heard of Muffins, Misty and Porridge, but the name that takes the biscuit, and definitely the creativity award, is Bumblesnarf. It is good to hear that we have a good posse of cat lovers here among us.

It is true that cats are cherished members of our families, bringing joy to homes up and down the country, so I understand the distress caused when they become lost or injured, or get hit by a vehicle. We have heard some harrowing stories today about the sense of loss and the need for closure from the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who gave a fantastic speech to open the debate. The hon. Member—I should say the omnipresent Member—for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about how sad it is to see lost cat posters around and families trying to find their lost ones. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) spoke of the need to take care of the needs of families and not just the animals.

I thank the Petitions Committee for giving us the opportunity to discuss the important subject of cat welfare, specifically the scanning of cats killed in road accidents. As I said, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk did an excellent job opening the debate. I too will take the opportunity to thank Cats Protection, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Blue Cross and the scores of other organisations that provide care for cats in all circumstances. These organisations, with the help of dedicated volunteers, do everything they can to reunite and rehome cats in need.

I commend the petitioners, Helena Abrahams and the others who have been so involved with the petition, as the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) set out in his early interventions—or perhaps I should say contributions—to the debate, on drawing attention to the importance of the scanning of cats and through that the importance of cats being microchipped. Like many Members of this House, I am sure, I was particularly taken with the examples from the Gizmo's Legacy team and the terrible accounts of cats killed in road accidents or lost for one reason or another. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) talked about the strong support for the petition in her constituency, and of course, north Manchester is not far from Macclesfield, where I live.

In many cases, owners have been unable to discover the fate of their beloved pet, and I understand that that serves to compound their distress. I agree that local councils and their contractors should do everything they can to identify the dead pets that they come across and, where possible, notify their owners so that they are not left in a sorry state of suspense—or worse.

The issues raised in the petition on cats and road vehicles have been the subject of several recent debates in this House, not least the debate in December brought by my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), whose work championing the cause of cats I wholeheartedly commend. He was also able to raise the subject at Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs oral questions on 28 March when the Secretary of State—a cat owner himself—said very clearly, in relation to my hon. Friend's private Member's Bill, which we have just discussed, "Bring it on." Some people might call that making policy on the paw—

Dr Drew: Very good.

David Rutley:—but I agree with him. We must do all we can to improve cat welfare. The benefits of microchipping are well known; that is why I am planning to issue, when I can, a call for evidence on making cat microchipping compulsory. It will be an important step forward for much-loved cats across the country. I hope that the petitioners and hon. Members here—not least the hon. Member for the beautiful constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who made a compelling speech, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) and the ever-present hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew)—will recognise it as an important step that we must take.

Over 107,000 people have signed the petition, which is a reminder of just how well loved our pets are in this country and of how important their welfare is to us. I

[David Rutley]

am pleased to explain the Government's response to key aspects raised by the petition in more detail. While the petition itself does not specifically call for compulsory microchipping of cats, in common with many animal welfare charities we recognise that microchipping is the key method for identifying a pet and linking it to its owner. On that basis, the Government recommend that any owner should microchip their cat to increase the chances of its being reunited with them if it gets lost. That is also strongly advocated by Cats Protection and other welfare organisations.

In April 2018, we updated the statutory cat welfare code with the welcome collaboration of Cats Protection and others. The code now emphasises the benefits of microchipping cats specifically, and I encourage cat owners everywhere to consider the benefits of microchipping, which can be obtained for a modest fee. In fact, microchipping can even be obtained free of charge: Blue Cross provides free microchipping services at its animal rehoming centres, hospitals and clinics, and other welfare charities do likewise. The hon. Member for Strangford, who often contributes to debates on animal welfare, talked about the Assisi Animal Sanctuary in Northern Ireland, where microchipping is provided free in certain circumstances. That is an important step.

Microchipping technology has greatly improved the chances of lost pets being reunited with their owners. For a relatively small, one-off cost of around £25—or, as I have mentioned, in some cases free of charge—people can have confidence that their beloved pet could be identified if it were lost. As the head of cattery at Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, Lindsey Quinlan, said, while the microchipping procedures are short and simple, “the return on their value is immeasurable”.

The Government's statutory cat welfare code therefore promotes microchipping on two grounds. First, microchipping gives cats the best chance of being identified when lost; secondly, and just as important, a lost cat that has a microchip is more likely to receive prompt veterinary treatment. In this way, microchipping ensures that cats are protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease, as required by the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

I am grateful to Cats Protection for its support in developing the cat welfare code. DEFRA officials remain engaged and are seeking additional opportunities to promote the benefits of cat microchipping. I intend to work closely with Cats Protection on this, which is why I met the organisation in January to explore how the Government can support this important work. Working with Cats Protection and the wider sector through the Canine and Feline Sector Group, the Government will further strengthen and protect the welfare of cats in this country.

It is because of success stories such as those we have heard today that I am so delighted that the proportion of cats that are microchipped has grown in recent years. Recent figures from the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals show that 68% of cats are now microchipped, up from 46% in 2011. However, a saddening statistic from a recent survey by Cats Protection suggests that the majority of the cats taken to their adoption centres in the past three years were not microchipped.

Compulsory dog microchipping was introduced in England through secondary legislation in 2016, due to the public safety risk posed by stray dogs as well as the

propensity for dogs to stray or get lost. Compulsory microchipping for dogs has been a real success, with a recognised reduction in stray and lost pets as a result, as the Dog's Trust's annual “Stray Dog Survey” can attest. That does not mean that cat welfare is less important than dog welfare; as I mentioned, I plan to issue a call for evidence on compulsory cat microchipping as soon as possible and to encourage its uptake even further.

Turning to the key aspect of the petition, the question of compulsory scanning, I recognise how painful it is to lose a pet and not to know what has happened. Under the Road Traffic Act 1988, there is a requirement for drivers to stop and report accidents involving certain working animals, as has already been discussed, including cattle, horses and dogs. As I understand it, adding cats would require primary legislation, which would be the primary responsibility of the Department for Transport, which is the lead Department. However, the highway code requires drivers to report accidents involving any animal to the police, which can help many owners to be notified if their cats are killed on roads. The Blue Cross briefing for this debate clarifies the case for cats well:

“Dogs are required by law to be kept under control i.e. on a lead, therefore, RTAs involving dogs can be investigated by the police to determine whether the owner has broken the law. As cats are legally allowed to roam freely, the owner is not committing an offence.”

There are additional responsibilities for dog owners:

“Legally speaking, dogs are also considered more likely to cause damage to a vehicle, requiring the driver to report the details to the police to establish liability.”

There are differences between cats and dogs and their behaviours. Nevertheless, I am pleased that it is established good practice for local authorities to scan any dog or cat found on the streets, so that the owner can be informed. That is often included as a requirement in street cleaning contracts, as it should be. However, I realise from the information provided by the petitioners and champions of Gizmo's Legacy that some councils may not be following this established good practice, so I will take this up with the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak). We need to agree how to encourage local authorities to work together, to promote best practice in this area, and to ensure that dead cats are scanned so that owners can be informed of their tragic loss. I will also write to the Local Government Association to set out my concerns and to seek assurances on increased adherence to the guidance.

Cats Protection found, through freedom of information requests, that 80% of respondent councils in England scan animals involved in road traffic accidents for a microchip. However, given the debate we have had, I think it is important that we have a more consistent appreciation of and approach towards this. The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd)—[*Interruption.*] I always get that one wrong; *Hansard* will correct it. However, what I do not get wrong is my recognition of her absolute commitment to cat welfare, and animal welfare more generally. I hope she realises that we want to take action in this area and make further progress.

Highways England has clear guidelines for contractors to follow when they find a deceased cat or dog on the national road network. This process is designed with owners in mind, giving them the best chance of being

informed that the incident has occurred, and is laid out in the network management manual. I am delighted to say that, in 2015, the necessary arrangements were made in all Highways England contracts for cats and dogs killed on the strategic road network to be collected and identified and for their owners to be contacted, including retrofitting the network management manual so that both cat and dog fatalities are collected and identified where possible. This area is the responsibility of the Department for Transport, so following the debate, I will work with the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), to explore what more the Government will do to ensure that guidance is being followed and what more can be done to help owners to know the fate of their beloved cats.

The hon. Member for Stroud makes a really important point: there is a huge responsibility on all of us who drive cars to consider our speed, because of the danger excessive speed poses not only to other humans but to animals. That point was incredibly well made. A centralised database was also mentioned. We already have a broadly unified microchipping system in the UK: there are 12 databases that meet the requirements of separate regulations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and we already have working systems that operate together and talk to each other. We can explore that more, but I wanted to reassure colleagues that there are databases that serve the function that we are concerned about today.

I think we all agree that we have had a truly interesting debate. There is clearly considerable sadness when a family pet is killed, and I understand that owners simply want to know what has happened, so that they are not haunted by the possibility that a missing pet might one day return. It is right that we do all we can to encourage local authorities and others to scan the fallen pets that they find, and I will work with colleagues across Government to see what more we can do to promote and encourage good practice in this area.

Dr Drew: Can these changes be made by secondary legislation, or do we need to change that Act?

David Rutley: I made inquiries on the basis of the points that the hon. Gentleman and others made during the debate. I understand it would need to be through primary legislation; I made the point about adding cats to that Act.

Compulsory microchipping has also been highlighted, and I am taking the first steps forward on that with a call for evidence. I hope that hon. Members, despite their broader concerns, see that we are committed to taking action here. That will be a hugely important step forward, showing our intentions and sending a clear signal to local authorities that more needs to be done, not least in Scotland; if I was in the Scottish Government I would be trembling in my boots waiting for the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran to intervene and take further action there. However, we will take these actions forward, as I discussed.

The Government's record on animal welfare is strong, and we will continue in that vein. We have a strong commitment to introduce increased maximum penalties

for animal cruelty—I am working at the highest levels to move that further forward—and to look closely at the regulation of animal rescue and rehoming centres. As always in the debates we have had over recent months, I recognise the degree of cross-party support for the action being taken. It is because of that that we are able to take much of this legislation forward, and as the hon. Member for Stroud will agree, there is more to do.

We have already introduced stronger animal welfare controls on dog breeding and the sale of pets, including on the breeding and commercial sale of cats. The implementation of Lucy's law, which bans the third-party sale of puppies and kittens, followed hot on the heels of Government support for Finn's law, which protects service animals. The Government are committed to protecting and enhancing the welfare of animals, including cats, and we will continue to build on our progress in the coming months and years, hopefully on a cross-party basis like we have seen in recent months.

6.5 pm

Martyn Day: It has been a pleasure to take part in today's debate. We have had a broad range of speakers from across the House, all showing a consensual approach—a very important point to emphasise. The request from the petitioners is for a simple legislative change, moving good practice on scanning into law, and it would be readily achievable. I welcome very much the comments that the Minister made and the commitment to move forward on microchipping, but I hope that he can make progress with the Minister responsible for local government on the scanning issue, too. I will be supporting my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) in pushing for Scotland to do that as well. There is a lot of positive work there.

Much has been said about microchipping. We heard from a number of organisations before today's debate that of the cats being presented for rehoming, between 61% and 80% have not been chipped and many others have chip details that are out of date, so there is a lot of work that we need to do. The Minister's comments will help us to move in the right direction, and I am very grateful for that; this really needs to be done.

I had a look at the DogLost site and saw a cat that was the spitting image of mine—albeit in a completely different area—so it would be easy to mistake one cat for another, but chipping removes the uncertainty. Blue Cross has given us details of a very positive case, and I have spoken about a lot of death today, so I would like to end on a positive note. Blue Cross says that Harry the cat was reunited with his family, after being missing for 10 years, because he had a microchip. That shows that it really does pay to get one.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 229004 relating to the identification of pets.

6.7 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 17 June 2019

HOME DEPARTMENT

Daniel Morgan Independent Panel: Contingent Liability for Indemnification

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House of Commons a departmental minute giving notice of a contingent liability for the issuing of an indemnity with respect to the work of the Daniel Morgan independent panel (DMIP).

The panel was established by the then Home Secretary in May 2013 to shine a light on the 1987 murder of private investigator Daniel Morgan, the background to the murder and the subsequent handling of the case.

The proposed indemnity will cover current and former members of the DMIP and any individual engaged at any time to provide assistance to the panel against any civil liability for any act done or omission made in good faith in the execution of his or her duties, or in the purported execution of his or her duties. This indemnity applies only to acts done or omissions made during the course of the panel's work, from its establishment on 10 May 2013 until its final report is submitted to the Home Secretary.

The indemnity is subject to the proviso that any liability which is to any extent met by insurers on the beneficiary of this indemnity, or for which reimbursement is made to any extent by such insurers, shall in that event and to that extent no longer be the subject of the indemnity and (if previously met or reimbursed by the Government) shall to that extent be refunded by the beneficiary to the Government.

Her Majesty's Treasury has approved the contingent liability in principle. The National Audit Office has been consulted on the proposal.

[HCWS1628]

Refugee Protection

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The UK is today reaffirming its ongoing commitment to supporting refugees, and to working with partners to find a longer-term approach to refugee protection, an approach that restores dignity and offers refugees a viable future.

The UK has a long history of supporting refugees in need of protection. Our schemes have provided safe and legal routes for tens of thousands of people to start new

lives in the UK. In every year since 2016 the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state. These remarkable achievements have been made possible through the tireless commitment of individuals, community and faith groups, local authorities, the devolved administrations, NGOs and our international partners. I am grateful to them for their ongoing support.

The global humanitarian need continues to grow with over 68.5 million people around the world forced from their homes and nearly 25.4 million refugees fleeing persecution; whether due to conflict, religious belief, sexuality or any reason under the refugee convention. Over half of those refugees are children and for some, resettlement to places like the UK is the only durable solution.

With our commitments under the vulnerable persons' resettlement scheme, vulnerable children's resettlement scheme and gateway protection programme coming to an end during 2020, it is right to provide certainty to our partners on the future of the UK's refugee resettlement offer. That is why today I want to confirm the UK's ongoing commitment to resettlement and set out our plans for after 2020.

Once we have delivered our current commitments we will consolidate our biggest resettlement schemes into a new global resettlement scheme. Our priority will be to continue to identify and resettle the most vulnerable refugees, identified and referred by UNHCR. Under the global resettlement scheme, we will broaden our geographical focus beyond the middle east and north Africa region and be better placed to swiftly respond to international crises in co-ordination with global partners.

In the first year of operation of the new scheme, the UK will aim to resettle in the region of 5,000 of the world's most vulnerable refugees. We will continue to purposefully target those most in need of assistance, including people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk. A new process for emergency resettlement will also be developed, allowing the UK to respond quickly to instances of heightened protection need, providing a faster route to protection where lives are at risk. Building on the experience of delivering the current schemes and the significant contribution of our community sponsors a key part of our resettlement offer will be that those resettled through our community sponsorship and Mandate routes will be in addition to our yearly, global commitment.

We will continue to work in partnership with local authorities. Recognising that their continued support will be fundamental to achieving our ambitions, we will ensure that they continue to be well-funded, supporting them to provide resettled refugees with the best possible support upon arrival.

We will also continue our strong engagement with civil society as we move forward.

We will continue to support the long-term integration of refugees, empowering them to fulfil their potential and contribute positively to their new communities.

[HCWS1627]

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 17 June 2019

TRANSPORT

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Transport questions on 13 June 2019.

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.

[Official Report, 13 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 818.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray).

The correct response should have been:

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 **across Great Britain, including six** in Scotland to get step-free access between 2019 and 2024.

EDUCATION

Inequality and Social Mobility

The following is an extract from the Opposition day debate on Inequality and Social Mobility on 12 June 2019.

Nadhim Zahawi: Making progress means building a strong economy, achieving record levels of employment and reforming the welfare system so that it supports people into work. Now, 665,000 fewer children grow up in workless households, the support of an income making them less likely to grow up in poverty. The UK's national living wage is growing faster than similar or higher minimum wages in other OECD countries, such as Belgium, France or Germany.

[Official Report, 12 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 767.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi):

Errors have been identified in my winding-up speech in the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: Making progress means building a strong economy, achieving record levels of employment and reforming the welfare system so that it supports people into work. Now, **667,000** fewer children grow up in workless households, the support of an income making them less likely to grow up in poverty. **As a proportion of median earnings**, the UK's national living wage is growing faster than similar or higher minimum wages in other OECD countries, such as **Belgium or Germany**.

ORAL ANSWERS

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